

**CHUCK PALANIUK: FIGHT CLUB, INVISIBLE MONSTERS,
CHOKE**

Ed. Francisco Collado

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Chuck Palahniuk is an uncomfortable author. Reading his texts requires a particular disposition on the part of the reader, who is asked to leave the comfort zone, and to enter a universe where we are confronted with the darkest side of a reality which is undeniable, but hardly ever put in the forefront. The narrative world of Palahniuk is thus made up of marginal characters: outlaws, transvestites, addicts (drug addicts, sex addicts, alcoholics), etc. However, instead of treating these transgressive characters as the exception, they become the norm. The concept of normalcy is immediately reversed in a fiction where nothing is what it seems at first sight. And yet, although we may find in his novels stories about “ex-centric” people and situations, we never find a critique from the narrator or the author. Palahniuk defines this as “writing without passing judgment” (*Stranger than Fiction*). This writing style has been classified as minimalist, but the thematic in his work is rather the opposite, being excessive in all possible ways. As Collado points out, “Violence, self-destruction, parental absence, pornography, the crossing of gender and body limits, are favorite themes of Palahniuk’s fiction since his first published novel” (6). All of these subjects are explored in the chapters that appear in the book.

Published by Bloomsbury, Francisco Collado’s volume offers a study of the controversial and bestselling author who is becoming more and more respected by the academic world, as evidenced by the recent publications of two studies on his work, such as Jeffrey Sartain’s *Sacred and Immoral: On the Writings of Chuck Palahniuk* (2008) and Cynthia Kuhn’s and Lance Rubin’s *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem* (2009). Collado’s edition focuses on three of his novels, namely, *The Fight Club* (1996), *Invisible Monsters* (1999) and *Choke* (2001), which are texts that the prolific writer published in the early stage of his career. In this sense, we miss the inclusion of *Survivor* (1999), Palahniuk’s second book, which comes chronologically between *The Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters*. The editor remarks that the three novels analyzed are the works most frequently taught in colleges and universities (1). This is, in fact, a strong reason, but including a chapter on *Survivor* would have added new light to Palahniuk’s criticism, since this novel, although less popular, is one of the most experimental works by Palahniuk, and, according to Collado, is “a book highly

praised for its innovative presentation of the story . . . with the book's pagination progressing backward toward the zero page of final destruction." It is also "a novel featuring an individual in need of love and sympathy, although despite the violence of its main topics and its explicit criticism of the system, it does not share the grotesque style so characteristic of *Invisible Monsters*" (13). It seems then, that the decision to leave this work out is due to the lack of grotesque elements in the text, although as Mendieta points out in his chapter, *Survivor* is fundamental to understand the empty eroticism, the pervasiveness of pornography in American culture and the theme of apocalypticism in Palahniuk's work (53-55).

There is, in that sense, a thematic and aesthetic connection between the three novels chosen for the volume. Collado approaches Palahniuk's fiction from the perspective of trauma studies. According to the introduction, we can find in Palahniuk's texts the trace of psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theories which allow us to have a deeper understanding of the narrative of the American writer. The traumas and addictions of all the characters that populate Palahniuk's novels are analyzed in depth, since they serve the author to provide criticism of contemporary American society as the land of addiction and consumerism, a nation where the relations between human beings are dehumanized. The theoretical perspective of trauma studies that is applied here seems very adequate to approach the controversial narrative of the author.

Collado attempts, and succeeds, to defend Palahniuk from the attacks of readers who considered him misogynistic and proto-fascist after the publication of his first novel, which caused the actual opening of many fight clubs in the U.S. The polemics is dismissed by the editor as a misunderstanding originated in the substitution of the actual writer for the fictional narrator, Tyler Durden. Thus, the three chapters devoted to the novel in the volume analyze the novel within the frame of trauma studies, both from a psychoanalytical perspective, and from a sociological and cultural viewpoint.

The first chapter on *The Fight Club* is by James R. Giles. Giles associates the trauma caused by the absence of the narrator's father and the lack of any satisfaction in his life with the creation of his alter ego, Tyler Durden, and the projection of an exclusively male family in the fight club (25-26). The chapter reads the violence in the novel as a fabrication by the narrator's deluded mind, so that everything that happens related to death or pain is in reality a product of the narrator's fragmented consciousness. Especially interesting is the analysis of space in the novel from the theories of Lefebvre. Attention is also paid to the homoerotic details which are again related to the narrator's fear of castration and his drive for destruction.

As Collado perceptively points out in his introduction, Giles's chapter connects with the following one, Eduardo Mendieta's study on masculinity (57-59). Mendieta believes that "Chuck Palahniuk should be read within this long history of

the novel as a medium for the reflection on distinct ‘American’ gendering practices” (46). He compares Palahniuk’s fiction to that of other contemporary male American writers (Roth, DeLillo, Bellow, Ellis, Updike) who have reflected on what it means to be a man in America (most of them also considered misogynist, we can add). The author proposes a “quasi-Nietzschean” reading of the novel focusing on masculinity in American society. He sees Tyler Dundren as the Nietzschean overman, which serves as a critique of the status quo. In his illuminating chapter, Mendieta explains the connection between the critique of the social order and the vindication of masculinity. He sees the fights as allegories of a new type of social resistance (51), reading Tyler Dundren as the alter ego of the American Everyman who sabotages the culture of submission and consumerism. Mendieta draws a sound argument by pointing to consumerism, eroticism and militarism as cardinal points of reference for American masculinity and convinces the reader that the portrait of masculinity in the novel, rather than being a reaffirmation, as Palahniuk’s detractors defend, is really about the challenge of being a male in a culture whose role models are no longer tenable (58).

The third chapter devoted to *The Fight Club* is “Body Contact: Acting Out is the Best Defence in *Fight Club*” by Laurie Vickroy. The chapter also explores trauma in the novel thus following up Giles’s idea of the abandonment of the father. Vickroy focuses on healing and on the difficulties of the process according to masculine standards. Also, like Mendieta, the author applies psychological trauma to societal crisis. By analyzing trauma symptoms in the novel and applying recent theories of trauma studies, the author explores the narrator’s dissociative stage and the need to find reinforcement in bodily action (69-70). Thus, Vickroy establishes a clinical cause/effect relationship for the development of the narrator’s traumatic experiences resulting in a narrative where Palahniuk combines personal history with cultural critique.

The second part of the volume is dedicated to *Invisible Monsters* (1999), a novel about a model who, after an “accident” is severely disfigured and, faceless and jobless, joins her ex-boyfriend, a policeman who is a closet homosexual and child abuser, and a drug addict transvestite who turns out to be her supposedly dead brother, in a crazy journey. The characters in the novel, as well as the themes, are obviously transgressive (drugs, sex changes, plastic surgery, sexual abuse, violence...). Collado defines the novel as a “hyper-parody” of different ideological notions, which deals with otherness, the post-human subject trapped in the media culture of simulations, and fragmentation (77).

The first chapter on this novel is by Andre Slade. The author reads it as a journey in search for identity –sexual, family, gender, social– from a psychoanalytical perspective using Freud and Lacan, specifically the mirror stage and the construction of the ego. The complex family relationships in the novel are thus explored from the viewpoint of their function in the acquisition of an identity.

There is in the text a pervasive emphasis on authenticity and the realization that everything is a construction. The author of the chapter also devotes a section to discussing perversion, fetishism and disavowal in the novel to conclude that the narrative presents a perverse sublime to conclude that the search for authenticity only leads to pain (96).

The second chapter on *Invisible Monsters*, by Richard Viskovic and Eluned Summers-Bremmer, in line with the rest of the pieces in the volume, explores trauma in the novel. After a first introduction to trauma theory, the authors discuss the fact that the traumatic events in the novel are told from Shannon's testimony, as narrator, and as such it is a process that allows her to heal. As Collado notices, this chapter is connected –“opposing to a certain degree” and “complementing” (79)– the one by Andrew Slade. According to the authors, the apparent traumas in the novel hide the real ones. The authors explore the meanings of surgery and performance, and conclude that the fragmented and proleptic structure of the novel serves as a way to articulate the traumatic events that have configured the life and destiny of the protagonists towards an ending of reconciliation and understanding.

Sonia Baelo-Allué defines the novel as a blank fiction road story. She contextualizes Palahniuk as a representative of blank fiction and compares him to Bret Easton Ellis. She draws a parallelism between the contrast between the beautiful and the ugly in both authors, and concentrates on the superficial world of beautiful appearances (fashion, money) which hides a secret often associated with violence (in Ellis's case, with murder in *American Psycho*), sexual abuse, addictions, perversions, etc. She analyses the use of the first person narrator in blank fictions and the uses of flashbacks. The author also discusses the conventions of American road stories, such as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, to conclude that Palahniuk's novel fits in Ronald Primeau's four categories for the road story: the road as space for dissent, the search for national identity, the individual self-discovery and the road trip as parody (125). By exploring the mythical aspects of the journey (with references to Joseph Campbell's seminal text) in a postmodernist, fluid and performative context, Baelo-Allué's reading provides an interesting new perspective on the novel within classical mythological and thematic studies. The comparative perspective in her chapter manages to locate Palahniuk's novel in within a literary tradition and to defend the place in the author in the American canon.

The third novel is *Choke*, another book with a protagonist, Victor Mancini, with traumatic family issues, abandonment, addiction (sex), parodies of history (he works impersonating a servant from the 18th century in Colonial Dunsboro), religion, loneliness and the need to be loved. According to Collado, all of these themes are focused on one: addictions, which include religion (137). Again, the authors of the following chapters apply trauma studies and psychoanalysis to the discussion of the novel. Jesse Kavadlo, for instance, in “Chuck Palahniuk's Edible

Complex” questions the function of choking in the novel and the fact that it implies a situation of in-betweenness, of contradictions and ambiguities, one being at the moment of choking between eating and the failure to eat (141). The chapter explores thus the different meanings of words, such as choke, Victor (the protagonist’s name), the metaphors used in the narrative for failure and that are connected to the different addictions of the protagonist, including an Oedipus complex. The author connects the narrative techniques used by Palahniuk with the metaphors in the novel to conclude that it is a work that confronts the reader with the paradoxical liminal nature of the narrative and of the world (156).

In the second chapter on *Choke*, David Cowart also includes the novel in the American canon, as Sonia Baelo Allué did, by placing this book in the tradition of writers who explored black humor, alienation and madness, such as Flannery O’Connor or Joseph Heller, J.S Salinger or Ken Kesey. Cowart also sees many connections with Postmodernist writers, such as John Barth or Thomas Pynchon, and he sees Palahniuk as an inheritor of that aesthetics. Like Kavadlo, Cowart also comments on the protagonist’s Oedipus complex and the religious parody in the book, which he sees as a recycling of a Freudian case in an ironical and postmodernist revision of cultural history. According to Cowart, however, Palahniuk goes beyond the modern and postmodernist aesthetics to offer, behind a sardonic appearance, a book with an important ideological substance (174).

In the last chapter of the book Nieves Pascual explores addiction in the novel. She sees male sodomy as the concealed arch-addiction, though the metaphors of ingestion and procreation. In a most enlightening reading, Pascual interprets Victor’s Oedipus Complex as a conscious recreation of Freud’s theories, and relates it to narcissism, the ego and addiction, which, according to her, are all projected in the use of pornography and food pornography, especially in the photograph of the man and the monkey, a reference through which Palahniuk parodies both creationism and evolutionism. She explores the intertextual references to Freud, the Bible and Darwin in the novel, and connects eating disorders with sexual traumas, and sexuality with textuality: “At the level of form, one more strategy underwrites Palahniuk’s phallogocentric narrative of food ingestion: orality” (192). To conclude, even though homosexuality in the text is not explicit, Pascual reads the text as an (implicit) articulation of autoerotic desire.

All the chapters included in the volume make a very coherent whole. All of them, as it has been pointed out, are inserted in the field of trauma studies. In this sense, Palahniuk’s novels prove to be an excellent choice for this type of approach due to the subjects treated in them. Francisco Collado’s volume is, then, a most welcome tribute to an author whose fictions were conceived, according to the writer himself, “not to be liked, but to be remembered.” And, without a doubt, Chuck Palahniuk will be remembered as one of the most relevant United States satirists of all times.

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