

Seekers After Truth – The Writings of Chuck Palahniuk

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2006

## Introduction

Chuck Palahniuk is still perhaps best known outside of his native America as the author of *Fight Club*, the novel upon which David Fincher based his 1999 film of the same name. He has however, at the time of writing, published six novels, one collection of short-stories (which might accurately be described as a ‘fix-up novel’), a collection of non-fiction writings, and a travel guide to his home town of Portland. The subject matter of his novels is often seen as controversial or subversive, though they also display an oft-overlooked humour, warmth and genuine interest in human behaviour.

Interviewed for *The Guardian’s* Books of the Year article in November 2005, Palahniuk expressed the following opinion:

Bookstores should have a new category for their stock, something that combines short story and essay and poetry, tragedy and humor, fiction and non-fiction. Maybe there should be one shelf labeled just ‘Truth’ or ‘Beauty’.

(The Guardian 2005)

Truth and Beauty are obviously concepts which Palahniuk values greatly, and looks for in literature of any genre and regardless of form. By extension they are central to the reading of his own work. To a degree, as is suggested by the use of the word ‘or’ in the above quotation, the two concepts appear to be synonymous for Palahniuk. His novels contain much in the way of satire where physical beauty, and industries which prize it, is concerned. The suggestion being that aesthetic beauty is of little value. Instead it is the Truth in its pure form which is genuinely Beautiful. Many of Palahniuk’s narrators suffer throughout the whole novel before they come to comprehend this.

That his novels take as their subject matter, some rather unseemly topics may, at first, be misleading. At their heart they are unfailingly stories of rescue or resurrection; the discovery of a personal Truth, which the narrator must endure all manner of destruction to reveal. Nevertheless, overcoming the impression of devastation and decadence which Palahniuk's novels entail is not easy. Each new book is routinely greeted with reviews which comment on the depravity of the subject matter, but fail to explore any deeper. The most recent book, *Haunted*, did attract some attention for its unique structure, but still most of the column inches were reserved for warnings about the subject matter.

Criticism of Palahniuk's work often invokes the words 'nihilism' or even (and especially in the case of *Fight Club*) 'fascism'. These charges are always based on the most cursory examination of the books' subject matter alone, and, as we will find, fail to hold water once more attention is paid to the themes, the use of satire, and particularly to the novels' endings.

There is too much to say about the various ideas of Beauty alone in Palahniuk's work to allow it the depth of examination it deserves here. Instead I will be focussing on the concept of Truth in its various different forms. Palahniuk deals with the concept of Truth in many ways: through satire, substitution and omission; and on every level of his work, from plot and characterisation, to the narrative devices he employs in his particular writing style. I will first examine how the concept impacts the thematic elements of Palahniuk's fiction, before looking at the stylistic choices he makes to emphasise Truth. I will also deal with Truth as it informs Palahniuk's non-fiction writing, where it is just as much of a concern, though in necessarily different ways.

## **1. Thematic**

The search for the Truth is present throughout all of Palahniuk's novels in various forms. It is unfailingly the narrator's quest, whether they are aware of it or not, but it is also found recurring in different ways around the characters as they make their journeys. There is also a

distinction to be made between a wider, universal Truth and the more intimate concept of a personal Truth. It is the latter which Palahniuk's narrators are searching for; through connection with others they are all looking for understanding. Palahniuk, by his own admission, is not a nihilist, despite the accusation frequently being made against him, but a romantic. Conscious that this is not the first impression many readers take from his work, he opens the introduction to *Non-Fiction* with these words:

If you haven't already noticed, all my books are about a lonely person looking for some way to connect to other people

(Palahniuk 2004, xv)

Whilst this is certainly true with regard to his early novels, it is a dynamic which has evolved and become more complicated with each new book. Whilst *Fight Club* (1996) and *Survivor* (1999) both offer the story of a single narrator, in some sense orphaned, seeking a connection with other people, the same cannot be said of *Haunted* (2005) which centres on the story of a group increasingly fragmented and seeking individuality. As early as 2000's *Invisible Monsters* Palahniuk seems to be questioning the value of connection with community, and with 2003's *Diary*, he is depicting the dynamic between individual and community as a malevolent one in which the narrator is trapped and abused. Indeed even in the case of the early novels it is with individuals that the narrators make meaningful and redemptive connections, not groups.

I wish to look at some of the ways in which the search for Truth enters Palahniuk's novels other than as the narrator's quest. These are many and ultimately serve primarily only to contrast the narrator's journey, which, in Palahniuk's fiction, is always one of reduction and loss. It is this aspect I will look at in detail, showing that in Palahniuk's novels the narrator must be brought to their knees before they are allowed salvation.

If we are to take Palahniuk's view, that all of his fiction is about a search for connection, we must remember that all of these connections exist within a framework of Truth. The narrators of Palahniuk's fiction fail to find any connection with society or other people,

when the means of doing so are false or destructive; only when there is honest affection can they be saved. So the nameless narrator in *Fight Club*, trapped and despondent in a life he sees as meaningless, searches for connection: first with members of self-help groups, then with the charismatic Tyler Durden (and by extension the members of fight club and later Project Mayhem) and finally with Marla Singer. The first, Palahniuk shows us, works for a time but fails to get to the root of the narrator's problem. The second is empowering and liberating, but ultimately destructive and futile. In the end, only Marla (and the genuine affection which she represents) can save the narrator. Similarly in *Survivor*, Tender Branson is abandoned by family, endures all manner of torture in the name of self-improvement and acceptability in a modern media culture, but finally finds acceptance only in the form of Fertility Hollis.

In fact, Palahniuk's fiction suggests strongly that knowledge may be limiting to the narrator on their journey; all of the ways which they have been taught to view the world often hold them back from seeing the Truth. In Palahniuk's fiction the journey of self discovery, common throughout all fiction of course, unfailingly takes the form of a reduction; it is always by way of loss that the Truth is revealed. Instead of acquiring a greater sense of self through the accumulation of knowledge and experience, Palahniuk's narrators suffer injury, destruction of their belongings, loss of friends and family, and ever greater degrees of isolation and loss of control until they experience a revelation. The Truth is not something external to be obtained, but is rather something internal to be discovered when everything extraneous has been stripped away. In its simplest terms it is stated in *Fight Club* that 'Maybe self-improvement isn't the answer .... Maybe self-destruction is the answer' (Palahniuk 1997, p.49).

But this method of epiphany by reduction, the exposure of a basic Truth by shedding the unnecessary, is not the only method by which Truth is sought in Palahniuk's novels; it is simply the only one which works. The numerous schools of thought and methods of inquiry which present themselves throughout the novels are commonly exposed as virtually useless; they teach the narrator very little and often hinder their progress. In *Diary* we learn about

graphology (the study of handwriting), and its potential for revealing a writer's true feelings. Whilst the extent of the practice's usefulness is limited in the novel, it is interesting that it is based upon the belief that writing has an ability to convey the writer's feelings and thoughts beyond both the actual words written and the writer's conscious effort. There is a suggestion here too then that the Truth is something buried which is not revealed until the unnecessary can be seen past. The concept is extended in the text by the introduction of Konstantin Stanislavski's idea, based on Pavlovian principles, that by accurately reproducing the physical act of writing one may experience the original writer's feelings at the time the inscription was made. Ultimately the concept is of little consequence to the narrative, but Palahniuk does not introduce it by accident. The retracing of the words echoes Misty Wilmot's retracing of her own steps, reincarnated each generation to serve the same sinister purpose on Waytansa Island. Both Misty's life and the act of writing are repeated, the suggestion being that there is a Truth hidden beneath each which time will tell. As a novel, *Diary* is full of ideas of concealment and revelation. The very name of the island which serves as the story's setting hints playfully at truths hidden and the inevitability of their eventual discovery. Likewise the novel's central premise, that the narrator is reincarnated each generation as an artist, suggests that there is something in that person which marks them out forever as an artist; they may change names and bodies and die and be reborn but they will always be an artist because that is the Truth of them.

Palahniuk considers himself of the school of minimalism, as taught by his mentor Tom Spanbauer. Further examination of what this entails, and how it impacts Palahniuk's writing, will be made below, but it is of interest here that one of minimalism's tenets is that every piece of art is in some way autobiographical. This idea surfaces in *Diary* as Misty often repeating 'Everything is a self portrait. A diary.' On one occasion she adds 'everything is important. Every detail. We just don't know why yet.' (Palahniuk 2003a, p.137). Here we find another version of the above idea that writing can contain within it a hidden Truth. This time the idea is that all art holds some Truth about its creator, but that that Truth may not be easily accessible even to the creator themselves. In her fracturing mental state Misty takes the idea further:

Your whole drug history's in a strand of your hair. Your fingernails. The forensic details.  
The lining of your stomach is a document. The calluses on your hand tell all your secrets.  
Your teeth give you away. Your accent. The wrinkles around your mouth and eyes.

(Palahniuk 2003a, p.137)

This idea, which becomes something of an obsession for Misty, is an extrapolation of her earlier tendency to see a person's expressions not in terms of what they are feeling or thinking, but in terms of what muscles are at work in their face. Art school has armed her with a huge knowledge of musculature, which she uses as yet another way of understanding her world. Early in the book she exhibits detailed knowledge of anatomical vocabulary, instructing the reader 'the official name for your liver spots is *hyperpigmented lentigines*' (Palahniuk 2003a, p.2) and pointing out 'your *lateral canthal rhytide*, your "crow's feet", are worse every day' (Palahniuk 2003a, p.4). In time however, this becomes a burden instead of a means of insight.

...[O]ne problem with art school is it makes you so much less of a romantic ... you have to learn about chemistry, about geometry and anatomy. What they teach you explains the world. Your education leaves everything so neat and tidy. So resolved and sensible.

(Palahniuk 2003a, p.191)

Instead of helping her understand the world, this knowledge becomes a hindrance, a type of lens through which she cannot help but look. She comes to understand her attraction to her husband in mathematical terms: the golden ratio, the definition of beauty in ancient Greek sculpture. Instead of the world as a whole she sees only parts, and she experiences a disconnection from the world as a result of her inability to see it in any way other than as a correlation of details. Where there should be a smile there is the contraction of a particular muscle, where beauty should be she sees only the mathematics of beauty. She refers to it at several points as 'The coma of details. Of education' (Palahniuk 2003a, p.105). What should be methods for understanding the world, for finding Truth, are ultimately, for Misty, as futile as graphology and the Stanislavski method. Here again we see that it is not the accruing of knowledge which reveals the Truth, rather it hinders it. All of these many techniques for understanding the world in a certain way do not save her from her fate. In the end she finds

herself in a dark room, painting endlessly without ever seeing her canvas. The scene is quite Beckettian, having echoes of *Molloy's* eponymous narrator typing out pages which are taken away for some unknown purpose. Misty finds herself in a similar position, painting blindly to no known end. And the results are technically perfect; the paintings meet every standard of beauty in a mathematical sense (they comply absolutely with the formulae) but mean nothing to Misty whatsoever.

Misty's salvation however, comes from the fact that as she is deprived of her husband, then her daughter and finally her liberty she suffers both a breakdown and a breakthrough. Only when her sanity begins to slip does she come to understand the truth of her situation. Again, first the narrator must be almost utterly reduced before they experience an epiphany. Despite the fact that she fails to learn the wider truth about the island in time, her triumph is in eventually coming to understand her place, and accept her true nature. This allows her to leave the message which will hopefully save her the next time around. Misty Wilmot is beaten by the world, but not before her personal Truth is revealed to her.

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*Lullaby*, of all Palahniuk's novels, is the most concerned with methods by which the Truth may be sought. Democritus, Marx, Wiccan tradition and the practices of Ancient Greece and Jewish orthodoxy are all mentioned throughout, and in some cases all coalesce (such as in Chapter 22) into a curious kind of melting pot. The effect is to suggest multiple methods of understanding the world, of seeking Truth, and yet because there are so many, the incompleteness of each is accentuated. To this list we can add the narrator's own method, one which is central to Palahniuk's work in a number of ways: journalism. The book's narrator, Carl Streater, is a journalist both by profession and by nature. He is prone to explanations of journalistic practice, such as the 'inverted pyramid' (Palahniuk 2002, p.35) method of placing the most important fact at the start of a story, and even when he is far past the point of caring about his job, he still exhibits journalistic tendencies in his narration of the novel.



Whereas it takes *Diary's* Misty Wilmot time to become disheartened with the tools she is given at art school, Carl seems aware of the limitations of his journalistic approach from the start. The early part of the novel sees him investigating the scenes of cot deaths, and Carl notes the power of his approach to shield him from the terrible realities he is faced with.

The trick to forgetting the big picture is to look at everything close up ... bury yourself in the little details. The facts. The best part of becoming a reporter is you can hide behind your notebook. Everything is always research.

(Palahniuk 2002, p.34)

Even though he doesn't phrase it as a shortcoming, Carl is aware that journalism allows him to hide from larger realities by seeking refuge in the details. Like Misty he can see anatomy instead of a corpse, but for him this disconnection is preferable; he would rather see details instead of the whole Truth, at least in the beginning of the novel. By the end he feels differently. In the book's penultimate chapter when he thinks that the woman he loves is dead, Carl repeats his former purpose:

My job is to notice the details. To be an impartial witness. Everything is always research. My job isn't to feel anything.

(Palahniuk 2002, p.255)

These short statements of fact ring hollow, and the addition of the final phrase emphasizes the point: Carl Streater has lost faith in his journalistic approach, it can't shield him from feeling this loss and he is forced to connect with the reality of his world. He can no longer look away from the big picture, and must accept the truth: that his love is gone. In actuality she is not dead, and is returned to him in the final chapter. As with *Fight Club* and *Survivor*, the narrator makes the leap of faith, overcomes his dilemma, and is rewarded with true love and understanding.

The eventual establishing of a connection with another person is a triumph for Palahniuk's narrators who are universally alienated and lonely. But just as important as the final accomplishment is the struggle to attain it. One of the themes Palahniuk returns to with

greatest frequency is that in order to be saved one must first be nearly destroyed. This is phrased in numerous different ways throughout the novels. *Fight Club's* Tyler Durden tells the narrator "It's only after you've lost everything ... that you're free to do anything" and that "If you lose your nerve before you hit the bottom ... you'll never really succeed" (Palahniuk 1997, p.70). In *Lullaby* Carl Streator comes to the conclusion that 'maybe the only way to find freedom, is by doing the things I don't want to .... Accept my punishment' (Palahniuk 2002, p.232), and similarly, in *Invisible Monsters*, the narrator is advised to "Do what you don't want. Do what you're trained not to want." (Palahniuk 2000a, p.221). The idea is that conventional methods of seeking connection are flawed, because they are predicated upon false beliefs about oneself. The narrators of Palahniuk's fiction all share a journey, to learn about themselves, to find their own Truth. Only then can they make the one successful type of connection: with individuals who honestly understand them.

True acceptance, Palahniuk is saying, can only follow once one has accepted the Truth of oneself. In Carl Streator's case, he must stop hiding behind details and look at the big picture. It is the dramatic events of the novel which traumatize Carl into surrendering his disconnection to the world. He is broken and reduced until he accepts the Truth. The relationship of necessity between destruction and salvation is something Palahniuk reinforces with each new novel, and it is *always* a process. Commonly it is not until the bitter end that Palahniuk allows his narrator to be saved. And it is for this reason that the denouement is particularly crucial in Palahniuk's work, serving, often, to reveal the novel's true meaning (at least with any clarity) for the first time. After all of the pain through which he puts his narrators, it is the denouements which reinforce Palahniuk's assertion that his novels are essentially romances. Only in the end does the narrator shed his illusions and find the connection he has sought.

I wish now to explore how this trend develops from Palahniuk's early work through to the more recent novels and how it impacts the search for Truth. The inclination towards increased scepticism of the value of community is something I have already noted. And

along with it one might consider Palahniuk's growing tendency to complicate his endings, and not allow the novel (or narrator) to reach a neat resolution.

Consider the ending of Palahniuk's debut novel *Fight Club*. Throughout the book we have witnessed the narrator's search for connection, firstly with self-help groups, then with fight club itself, and finally (and successfully) with Marla Singer. Palahniuk allows the nameless narrator a relatively simple resolution, taking the familiar form of the destruction of the old self in order to give birth to the new, more enlightened self. In *Fight Club's* case, much of its ending's power is derived from the fact that it enacts this moment of destruction and rebirth so literally.

Palahniuk's second novel *Survivor* also allows its narrator, Tender Branson, to be similarly rewarded with connection and understanding once he has survived the loss of his family and the trials of celebrity, and has learned to value himself. It is the chance to tell his story and have it believed which saves him. For much of the novel Tender has been surrounded by falsity in many forms: universal misunderstanding about his past, cosmetic changes to his appearances, false accusations of mass murder; it is only when he finally finds the chance to tell his story (to reveal the Truth about himself), that he can be saved. In large part it is Fertility who guides him towards his opportunity, and it is she who saves him.

*Invisible Monsters* also saves its revelations for the denouement, but the resolution is less neat. Throughout the novel Shannon McFarland displays mixed feelings regarding her connection with community and other people. The novel does a lot to blur lines of identity and concepts of self. After her accident, when she is reduced to following Brandy Alexander around committing fraud and theft, she is not allowed a name but instead goes by a series of ridiculous monikers which are imposed upon her. She also wears a veil constantly, which serves as a form of disconnection with the world; when speaking of it Shannon frequently adds the phrase 'Thank you for not sharing' (Palahniuk 2000a, p.200). Shannon's arc in the novel is from enjoying this disconnected anonymity, to allowing herself to be revealed. Early in the novel she tells of how her invisibility allows her insight:

When nobody will look at you, you can stare a hole in them. Picking out all the little details you'd never stare long enough to get if she'd ever just return your gaze, this, this is your revenge.

(Palahniuk 2000a, pp.24-5)

Brandy assures her that 'Behind a good veil you could be anyone', but tellingly adds "'Don't worry... other people will fill in the blanks'" (Palahniuk 2000a, p.108). And it is the latter which happens with increasing frequency. With her jaw deformed Shannon is unable to pronounce clearly, and what we find is that when someone cannot understand her they answer the question *they* think she should have asked, or reply to the comment *they* think she should have made. Sometimes this happens with several people at once, all paying no attention to the other:

I say, "Kong wimmer nay pee golly."

And Evie says, "Yeah, these are your shoes, but I'm not hurting them any."

And Sister Katherine says, "No, no mail yet, but we can write to prisoners after you've had your nap dear."

(Palahniuk 2000a, p.53)

The result is that Shannon becomes a kind of composite of others' expectations, ideas and judgments. She is too afraid to reveal herself for the majority of the book, explicitly rejecting the truth.

And if I throw off my veil now, I'll just be a monster, a less than perfect, mutilated victim. I'll be only how I look. Just the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

(Palahniuk 2000a, pp.278-9)

Shannon's arc takes her from being a model only concerned with how she looks to being mutilated and wanting to be more than just her appearance. Her triumph is that once her fellow models, friends (and family) are dead she finally accepts the way she looks and understands just how much it means. Once everyone and everything she held dear about herself is destroyed she finds the Truth of herself.

[The photos] aren't good or bad, ugly or beautiful. They're just the way I look. The truth. My future. Just regular reality.

(Palahniuk 2000a, p296)

In the end Shannon's quest is more for acceptance of self than connection with community. The people around her suffer from the same distorted view of themselves which Shannon has at the story's beginning, and only one of them (Brandy) is even partly redeemed before her death. Community at large is present in the novel only in the form of people who selfishly project upon Shannon all of their concerns and opinions; it is not something worth fighting to connect to. This does not make Shannon's journey any less of a quest after Truth, but it does emphasize personal Truth, understanding of self, for which the rewards in this case seem slight, as Shannon is left enlightened but alone.

Both the value of connection and the concept of Truth are complicated further in Palahniuk's latest work of fiction: *Haunted*. The book's framing device is written in the first person plural, a collective voice which is never resolved as belonging to any one character. Chapters in this style introduce first poems about and then stories by other characters, all of whom are given the floor for the space of a short story before being subsumed once more by the collective. The result is an odd one, almost operating in absolute opposition to the search for connection. By virtue of the first person plural narration the group is already connected. They are connected by their circumstances (on a writing retreat) and their aspirations (to become successful writers); what follows is the destruction and reduction of both the group collectively, as some are killed, and individually as their mental states deteriorate. What each of the characters comes to long for however is a type of disconnection and individuality. In this respect *Haunted* is Palahniuk's most nihilistic work. Nobody learns anything, nor seeks anything valuable; there is no lofty search for the Truth here, instead there is the rather less admirable obsession with *being* the "truth".

One of the refrains which occurs with great frequency throughout *Haunted* is the idea of 'the camera behind the camera behind the camera' (Palahniuk 2005, p.255); each character seeks to be the one infallible witness to their collective story. As a group they actively make things

worse for themselves, damaging the plumbing of the house they're trapped in, and spoiling all of the food so that their story will be more dramatic when they are rescued. Ironically though the collective voice often speaks of being that final camera documenting all others, the final Truth, each person is actively fabricating the seriousness of their situation. They speak about their collective experience as a prelude to the reality of telling their story to the outside world and being the survivor of it, and each seeks to make the situation as dire as possible.

Still, something *more terrible* has to happen.  
For market share. For dramatic appeal.  
Something *more awful* has to happen.

(Palahniuk 2005, p.174)

Several characters self-harm in order that they should have injuries to show on television, the idea being that the more damage you have suffered the more authentic your story. In part the whole book is a satire of the modern media's obsession with witnessing destruction and depravity, and particularly of reality television programming bent on reducing people to their lowest, and the willingness of people to be reduced. It can also be read as Palahniuk satirizing himself. Here is the familiar self destruction in the name of Truth, but a Truth devalued and distorted. There is not a desire for connection with others but for superiority over them: to be the definitive witness, to have suffered the most, to be famous. Even those few characters that are alive at the book's close are still trapped in the house dreaming of their fame, having learned nothing. But perhaps this is Palahniuk's point: if you have no interest in connections with other people, or in any Truth other than the one you fabricate to your own ends, then you will have no revelation, you will not be rewarded, you will stay locked in a house, and rot.

The failing of the characters in *Haunted* is that they pull in opposite directions. There is a strong suggestion running throughout Palahniuk's other fiction that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, indeed that the *Truth* is far more than the sum of its parts, and that attempting to understand the whole through one particular lens, whether graphology, anatomy or even art, is futile. We have seen this in the assertion that details blind Carl

Streator from the wider 'Truth, in Misty Wilmot's dissatisfaction with the 'coma of details', and it is also present in Shannon McFarland's eventual discovery that she is far more than just her appearance. To find the concept in its purest form however, you must of course return to the denouement of *Fight Club*.

Once the narrator realises that Tyler Durden is a projection of his mind, he must accept that all of Durden's qualities (negative and positive) are also his own, and that all of the limitations he has perceived as applying to him, from which Tyler was so free, were also imposed by his own mind. The narrator's lack of control over his life, seen in his dead-end job, his inability to sleep and his disillusionment with all of his possessions, is mirrored by Tyler's absolute self-assurance. When it is revealed to the narrator that they are one and the same, he must accept that he has the power to control his own life; he can no longer hide behind his perceived impotence.

When *Fight Club's* narrator shoots himself in the head, to rid himself of Tyler Durden, he is literally acting out Palahniuk's belief that 'you cannot have who you are now and become who you wish to become', that the only way to achieve salvation is 'through the destruction of the self' (Kleffel 2002). But there is a fine line here which is vital to understanding the novel's real message. It is not the case that the narrator survives Tyler Durden unscathed and unchanged. By pulling the trigger he is sacrificing both his anti-social alter-ego and his own ineffectuality. He is taking responsibility for his life. At this late stage the narrator is forced to accept that neither his former self nor Tyler Durden represents the real him, but that in truth he is an amalgam of both. In Palahniuk's fiction there is great value in the gestalt; the big picture is so much more important than the details. And to realise one's true nature Palahniuk says, 'you have to destroy the current you to achieve ... the gestalt you' (Kleffel 2002).

And destroying themselves is what Palahniuk's narrators are good at. To the curious semi-suicide of *Fight Club's* narrator we can add Tender Branson crashing a plane to destroy the version of himself that the media has created, so that he can be free. We can add Shannon

McFarland shooting off her own jaw to escape the trappings of her beauty, and later discarding her veil to be born anew. We can actually add every self-destructive thing done by Palahniuk's narrators to themselves. Every time *Choke's* Victor Mancini asks himself 'what would Jesus not do?' (Palahniuk 2001, p.169) it is because he believes, as do the others, that, as *per* Tyler Durden, "If you lose your nerve before you hit the bottom ... you'll never really succeed" (Palahniuk 1997, p.70), or, as *per* Carl Streator, 'the only way to find freedom is by doing the things I don't want to .... Accept my punishment' (Palahniuk 2002, p.232). Going against their nature and destroying the self they knew are the means by which the narrators are saved. They are reduced enough and then they are redeemed with the Truth of themselves. This is where the characters of *Haunted*, who *indulge* their natures and harm themselves only as a means to their own greedy ends, fail so completely to find redemption.

## 2. Compositional

Now that we have established the importance of Truth as a theme in Palahniuk's fiction, I will look at the ways in which it relates to his writing style, and the narrative techniques he uses in his novels. Though his stories often include some elements of fantasy (such as *Lullaby's* culling song, and *Diary's* reincarnation plot device), they are firmly set in a recognizable world. Palahniuk is careful to treat these elements as an extension of reality rather than a departure from it; he seeks to stretch the truth, to incorporate the extraordinary into the ordinary in such a way as to have it accepted by the reader. Often they can be accepted despite their extreme nature by virtue of the fact that the story is told in a subjective fashion; we find out that Tyler Durden is the other half of the narrator's split personality at the same time he does, and we don't feel cheated because the narrator's point of view has become our own. It is also obviously the case that many of these plot devices serve also as metaphors: *Lullaby's* culling song and *Haunted's* gothic mansion are both easily read as comments on the modern media.



As has already been mentioned, Palahniuk sees his writing as belonging in the tradition of minimalism. By his own admission there are very few minimalist novelists (he names Joy Williams as one), as the style is commonly used for the composition of short stories, such as those by Raymond Carver and Amy Hempel. It was in the writing workshop of novelist Tom Spanbauer however, that Palahniuk learned most of what he now practices.

Minimalism's *raison d'être* is to engage the reader to the greatest possible extent. By creating, and enhancing the bond between reader and narrator, the reader is challenged to follow the narrator's journey, to judge themselves in accordance with every decision which the character makes, and every challenge which they face. Palahniuk often expresses his wish that the reader comes out of one of his stories 'a slightly different person, and not entirely comfortable in the world anymore' (Kleffel 2005), somehow altered by the experience of having been made to see the world through different eyes for a while. This is a lofty goal: to make the narrator's journey also a journey for the reader, in the hope that they too might learn something. Palahniuk however, sees his purpose as nothing less than allowing his reader to make their own search after Truth, by *emerging* them in the story and *merging* them with the narrator.

My goal is to create a metaphor that changes our reality by charming people into considering their world in a different way.

(Guardian 2004)

Minimalism has several tools to help accomplish this. Most obviously the style uses almost exclusively the first person tense, and entails some guidelines on the most effective use thereof. In interviews Palahniuk often speaks of an emphasis on 'sub-vocalization', by which is meant the art of getting the reader to internalize the speech of the narrator, to become that character to the greatest possible extent. Palahniuk sees the first person narrative as a paradox, and one which requires the performance of a complicated balancing act. It has, on one hand, the power to make the story far more engaging and immediate, but on the other hand, it makes it quite obviously someone else's story. One of the techniques by which Minimalism closes that gap between narrator and reader is by infrequent use of the word 'I',

particularly in the beginning of a story. The feeling is that to strongly identify the narrator too quickly allows the reader no room to identify with them. Conversely, allowing the narrator to remain somewhat ambiguous in the beginning ensures that the reader can more easily substitute themselves into their position. Once this relationship is established the narrator can be revealed, and the bond developed. This technique has become more pronounced throughout Palahniuk's work, so, whilst 'I' appears in the second paragraphs of *Fight Club* and *Survivor*, it is not until the second chapter of *Choke* that the first 'I' occurs, on page 9. Similarly, in the short story 'Guts' from *Haunted*, 'I' does not appear until the third page, and the narrator is not revealed fully until even further in. Several tricks are employed to achieve this: the use of 'me', 'my' or 'mine' as an alternative where possible, and, as with *Choke's* opening chapter, the switch to the second person.

Tom Spanbauer's *The Man Who Fell in Love With the Moon* uses another technique: directly addressing the reader in the first paragraph. This arguably marks the separation between reader and narrator even more than the use of the first person pronoun, but it also engages. It is a trick Palahniuk adopts, for example, in the opening line of 'Guts':

Inhale.  
Take in as much air as you can.  
This story should last about as long as you can hold your breath, and then just a little bit longer.

(Palahniuk 2005, 12)

The reader is drawn in and immediately put into the narrator's position (breathless underwater). As well as engaging the reader in a dialogue from the beginning, this also incorporates another Minimalist method of creating a bond between narrator and reader: invoking the physical. This is something which Palahniuk uses in various ways throughout his own work, with the goal always being to create a reaction in the reader, to involve them in the story to the greatest possible extent, so that it feels true to them. In *Fight Club* Palahniuk uses the technique to describe the fights themselves, in *Invisible Monsters* it describes surgery, and in *Choke* sex. In *Diary* there are passages as follows:

She pokes the pin of the hairy old brooch - real, real slow – through the meat of your hand or your foot or your arm. Until she hits bone, or it pokes out the other side.  
(Palahniuk 2003a, p.41)

One of the characteristics of this ‘on the body’ technique, as Palahniuk calls it, is that the passages can be quite drawn out. I quote the above because, though short, it contains several elements designed to affect the reader: the mentioning of specific body parts, the direction ‘real, real slow’ added almost parenthetically in order to slow the reader down, unsettling references to meat and bone. ‘On the body’ writing is designed to be personal, and to work on the reader’s nerves. The description is meticulous and sometimes graphic, describing the sensation itself rather than relying on reportage. So instead of ‘I had a headache’ or ‘my head hurt’, Minimalism would employ description of exactly what the narrator feels, the pressure and ache, and exactly where it is felt, in order to cause a sympathetic response in the reader. The idea is to make the events of the story as true to the reader as possible, indeed to make it *more* real than their actual situation when reading.

It’s one thing to engage the reader mentally, to enrol his or her mind and make them think, imagine, consider something. It’s another thing to engage a reader’s heart, to make him or her feel some emotion. But if you can engage the reader on a physical level as well then you have created a reality that can eclipse their actual reality.  
(Palahniuk 2004b)

A somewhat skewed compliment to Palahniuk’s success with the technique are the more than 60 cases of fainting which occurred at his readings across America of the aforementioned notorious short story ‘Guts’. Containing very graphic ‘on the body’ descriptions of, amongst other things, prolapsed intestines, the story gained something of a reputation on the literary reading circuit for causing its audience to feel decidedly unwell. This, of course, was entirely the objective: to write in such a way that the story felt so real to the audience, so true, that it affected them as though it was happening to them.

Using the ‘on the body’ technique is not primarily designed to shock but to engage. The descriptions of fights in *Fight Club* (e.g. p. 123) are meant to leave the reader feeling raw and stunned, *Choke*’s sexual passages are meant to exhilarate. What the narrator experiences, the

reader should be a part of to such a degree that what is true for the one becomes true for the other.

Another related idea central to Minimalism is that the character shapes the story; the whole narrative is informed by the particular characteristics of the narrator. One important manner in which this manifests is in what Palahniuk calls 'head authority'. He starts to develop a character by asking 'what does that character know very, very well?' (Kleffel 2002), and allowing their passion, or their knowledge base, to inform their personality. The idea is that someone's passion is the Truth of them, and can inform the reader of who they are more effectively and efficiently than any other characteristic can. In *Fight Club*, we have Tyler's expertise with making explosives using household ingredients; in *Survivor* we are given Tender's boundless knowledge concerning etiquette and household maintenance. This latter of course, has the peculiar bent of being geared towards the occlusion of bullet holes and the removal of bloodstains, but such idiosyncrasy only serves to further individualize the character, and reveal them to the reader. This 'head authority' also serves to engage the reader with the character by dint of the latter's superior knowledge; the character is presumed to be more authentic and trustworthy when they appear to be a specialist in some area.

Similarly, a story is informed by the character by way of them imposing their own timeframe upon it. This works in two important ways: a structural level as regards the telling of the story, and the personal level of showing time pass and locating the character in time. Palahniuk's novels are almost universally set against a 'clock': a given, determinable timeframe within which the events must occur. This is usually imposed in the first chapter, as with *Fight Club*, where the reader is immediately made aware that the end of the book will find the character in jeopardy, a gun in his mouth in a skyscraper set to explode. Once the crisis is established, Palahniuk cuts back to some months earlier so that we can discover how it comes about, but all of the time we are aware of what we are building up to. This is taken a step further in *Survivor*, where the narrator tells his entire story into the black-box recorder of a crashing plane. Palahniuk employs reverse pagination, so that a glance at the bottom of

the page will always remind the reader of the ongoing countdown. Later novels have seemingly strayed from this formula. *Diary*, with its theme of reincarnation, relies on a relatively linear format of sequenced diary entries to retain the novel's big twist. However, once it is revealed to us that the narrator is reincarnated time and time again to perform the same function, a second reading reveals many hidden clues to this fact. Palahniuk, with each new book, finds new ways to play with the timeline, and make it unique to the narrator who is experiencing it. Shannon McFarland in *Invisible Monsters* tells her story in an almost stream-of-consciousness fashion. Within any one chapter, many paragraphs begin with the words 'Jump to...' as she describes first something happening in the present, then an incident from her past and next something that will happen later. As with all of Palahniuk's books the timeline is not fixed, but commanded, in one way or another, by the narrator.

The second method by which the character informs the time within the novel is on a smaller level: by relating it in a personal manner. This is a Minimalist technique employed, for example, by Tom Spanbauer when he writes:

The summer after the spring when I'd found my mother dead up on Not-Really-A-Mountain, and not long after I had woke Ida up with my hard-on...  
(Spanbauer 1992, p.62)

Here we see time from the narrator's point of view. It is not exact (there are no calendar dates), but rather related to personal experience, almost anecdotal. In the above passage we also see a similar attitude to geography, and the use of a colloquial term for an erection, all of which help to fully draw the character, and make the story his own – True to him. In this way the ability of the first person narrative to personalize experiences is elevated. Minimalism seeks to make the story as subjective as possible, to make it the narrator's own. This has obvious parallels with the search for Truth which Palahniuk's narrators undertake, seeking their own way to connect with and understand their world.

### 3. Non-Fiction

It is an interesting experiment to compare Palahniuk's non-fiction writings to his fiction. I wish now to look at the three distinct sections which comprise Palahniuk's 2004 collection *Non-Fiction*, which was perhaps misleadingly titled *Stranger Than Fiction* on its American release. Despite the less extreme subject matter he retains much the same style, and many of the same preoccupations and beliefs about his writing's purpose.

The interviews conducted by Palahniuk, which comprise the 'Portraits' section of *Non-Fiction* display the same interest in connecting (or re-connecting) with society, or with other individuals, as also recurs in Palahniuk's fiction. His journalism tends toward the slight, displaying a tendency to simply let the subject talk, and to record their story. Palahniuk offers only the least amount of commentary, contributing more in the way of scene-setting, almost acting as a framing device for the interviewee's tale. Just as with Minimalism's approach to the first person narrative, Palahniuk lets his subject reveal themselves through their own stories and quirks. In his fiction Palahniuk often gives a character a 'chorus' which they repeat at certain moments to re-assert their point of view or situation. In *Lullaby* Carl Streator is fond of counting to remind us of the dangers of him losing his temper; in *Choke* Victor asks himself time and again 'What would Jesus not do?' (Palahniuk 2001, p.169). The effect is also to personalize the story by reminding the reader of the narrator's personality. In his non-fiction Palahniuk finds the 'choruses' which people naturally use. Throughout the piece entitled 'In Her Own Words', Palahniuk peppers Juliette Lewis reading questions from a list she once made. At any given moment he breaks off from describing her surroundings or her appearance to remind us of her personality by inserting one of her questions. It is also a method of having her dictate the pace of the article, much in the same way as the fictional narrator's determine the timelines of their stories.

It is easy to detect a certain skepticism with journalistic practice in Palahniuk's non-fiction style. His fiction makes clear that an overabundance of details distracts from the big picture, and as such his commentary is slight. If most journalism can be accused of wanting to be

that impossible ‘camera behind the camera behind the camera’, Palahniuk is cautious about making what he probably sees as interruptions; he allows the subject of the interview to reveal themselves, rather than make judgments about them himself. Fittingly he seems to desire an almost first person form of journalism, in which it is almost his job merely to transcribe the conversation. The truth is of such high value to Palahniuk that he does not wish to do anything to stand in its way.

These traits are also visible in *Non-Fiction*'s essay section, notably entitled ‘People Together’. Palahniuk seeks out people with niche passions, and exhibits a genuine interest in them and their lives. From the Rock Creek Lodge Testicle Festival, to the College wrestling circuit, demolition derbies and people who have built their own castles, he engages with the people involved and, without judgment, tells the story of their passions. Or rather he allows *them* to tell it for the most part, though he does indulge in more description than with the interviews because he is writing about an interest or an event rather than simply a person. Even here though, there is no judgment involved, even when the subject is something as odd as a Testicle Festival. Palahniuk sets the scene, explains the facts, and allows those involved to speak for themselves. The strong parallel here is to the ‘head authority’ which many of his fictional narrators exhibit – that one thing they know better than anyone, which informs who they are. The Truth of them. Palahniuk finds it here too, in each of the people involved in these esoteric pastimes, who hold these niche passions, their story is their Truth and Palahniuk obviously believes the good journalist will allow them to tell it.

This approach is also present in Palahniuk's other non-fiction book: *Fugitives and Refugees: A Walk in Portland, Oregon*, a travel guide in which, instead of presenting the run-of-the-mill tourist attractions of his home town, Palahniuk describes his personal favourite places and activities. Descriptions of all manner of strange idiosyncratic museums, theatres and a tour of the local sewer system are interspersed with personal anecdotes, allowing for a travel guide that offers the true Portland – or at least the author's personal connection with Portland.

...

The third part of *Non-Fiction* is perhaps the most interesting. Entitled 'Personal', it is a series of essays in an autobiographical form, which discuss everything from Palahniuk's experience escorting terminally ill people on day trips, to how he dealt with his father's murder. Just as he tells others' stories with respect and enthusiasm, no subject seems to be too personal as Palahniuk seeks to make a connection with his readers. The style is necessarily somewhat different from the preceding two sections, as here Palahniuk serves as his own subject. Nevertheless, many of the characteristics of his journalism remain. Just as he makes no judgment of others, Palahniuk doesn't seek to judge his own actions or feelings. He is however, open and honest about both, even when the truth is painful. In 'Escort' he does not seek to hide the fact that he quickly quit his escort job because it saddened him. In 'The Lip Enhancer' he is not averse to exposing his own fleeting obsession with his physical appearance.

In 2005 Palahniuk spoke openly for the first time about his homosexuality. He posted a message on his website criticizing a journalist who had recently interviewed him, and whom he suspected was going to include in her finished article mention of his long term relationship with a man. When the article was published it made no mention of his sexuality, and Palahniuk posted a somewhat embarrassed retraction of his criticisms. The incident remains an odd one considering Palahniuk's seeming willingness to be absolutely open about every other aspect of his life. As much as his non-fiction writing impartially sets out the facts and allows the reader to make their own judgments, one can only assume that Palahniuk did not consider his sexuality pertinent. Whilst this is understandable, for a writer of non-fiction as prolific as he has been since the late 90s (especially having written numerous autobiographical pieces), one would think the subject might have arisen. Indeed re-reading some of the autobiographical pieces does reveal a certain amount of careful pronoun manipulation. Perhaps the reason the incident seems so out of character is that it served to reveal an omission in the work of a writer renowned for his openness, and moreover suggest



some deliberate steps to hide the truth, as though Palahniuk, who treasures the truth above all else, was afraid of how he may be judged.

Palahniuk's usual determination to tell the whole truth is nowhere more evident than when he writes about the death of his father. In 1999, whilst promoting his work in the press excitement surrounding the *Fight Club* film, Palahniuk received a call that his father's body had been found in Latah County, Idaho. It turned out that he had been murdered by the ex-husband of a woman whom he had met through a personals column. Writing about what must surely be the most excruciating of experiences, Palahniuk describes in detail the day that he attended the crime scene, how he investigated his father's death and how he and his siblings dealt with their father's belongings and estate. It is not easy to read, and must have been unthinkably painful to write sentences like:

This summer, someone murdered my father in the mountains of Idaho and burned his body down to a few pounds of bone.

(Palahniuk 2004a, p.230)

In an article for the Times newspaper some years after the fact, Palahniuk related the story again. This time there is some self analysis, as he critiques the way he handled the situation.

I created a purpose for myself: to be the archivist, the person who'd tell my family how my father died.

(Johnson 2003)

He describes how he avoided looking at the terrible big picture of his father's murder by immersing himself in the details. He read medical reports and sat with the coroner to learn exactly how his father died. He did what Carl Streator does in the book Palahniuk wrote the following year: hid in the details, became an impartial observer, a detached recorder of the facts. The experience obviously informed Streator's character, and his eventual revelation, that he must forgo his detachment and accept the big picture (the whole Truth), seems all the more heroic in the light of it.

## Conclusion

Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

- John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'

The worlds which Chuck Palahniuk creates in his fiction are dark ones. They are filled with dark things: destruction, pain and loss. And though his narrators belong inextricably to those places, their triumph is in rising above them. They suffer and struggle with the world and with themselves, they are almost destroyed, but in the end they are saved. That salvation comes from the shedding of illusion, and the acceptance of Truth.

In both his fiction and non-fiction work, Palahniuk shows a great reverence for personal Truth. Whether something is odd or embarrassing or upsetting or terrifying, it is worth making the effort to simply show it as it is, without judgment or interference. And though his novels sometimes include fantastical elements, they are described in recognizable ways by narrators who think and feel, and using language which allows the reader to almost feel them too.

Truth is of immense value to Palahniuk, but it is often bought with great pain. That it is worth the struggle however, is precisely what makes it so valuable. Indeed a better word would be 'expensive'. Palahniuk's narrators pay for their Truth with every possession they

own, every comfortable disconnection they maintain, or every illusion they hold about themselves. The irony is that this cost buys them nothing, it only reveals what they had in them to begin with: their own Truth. And that is Beautiful.

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