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The World Inverted:
Chuck Palahniuk's fiction as a challenge to neoliberal capitalism

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Abstract

In 2019, neoliberal capitalism and its practices appear to be so well-established in Anglo-American countries as to be almost incontestable. Much academic discourse has focused on delineating the features of neoliberal capitalism and diagnosing the effect it has on its human subjects, with many theorists arguing that it produces subjects who are individualistic, competitive and isolated. This thesis aims to determine what role, if any, fiction can play in the wider project of challenging neoliberal capitalist subjectivities. More specifically, it asks: To what extent can the work of one contemporary writer, American author Chuck Palahniuk, challenge his reader's understanding of their own society and even prompt a transformational impulse within them? This thesis analyses nine of Palahniuk's novels through the lenses of Marxist theory and contemporary theories of neoliberal capitalism in order to consider how fiction can alter a reader's understanding of their society. Looking beyond representational content alone, I argue that Palahniuk's use of stylistic features such as hyperbole, metaphor, symbolism and satire work to unveil and exaggerate aspects of neoliberal capitalism to the reader that have become so normalised that they are often viewed as inevitable or 'common sense.' At the same time, inbuilt moments of existential crisis and ambiguous endings work to break through the reader's routine assumptions as to what is inevitable or important and create moments of uncertainty and doubt about neoliberal capitalism. The thesis thus argues that any transformational impulse ignited in the reader by Palahniuk's fiction is best understood as a result of the dialectic work of content and form in tandem.

For my grandmother.

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The Search for Freedom

“Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious” (Orwell, 1949, p. 74).

Writing on his philosophy of fiction, American novelist Chuck Palahniuk states that one way of looking at fiction is as a “safe laboratory for exploring ourselves and our world...trying on costumes and running a social model until it breaks down” (2004, p. 37). That Palahniuk’s non-fictional contemplations tend toward musings on the transformation of contemporary capitalist – and specifically North American – societies will come as no surprise to anyone who has read his most famous and most overtly-rebellious novel, *Fight Club* (1996). However, fewer people realise that many of his novels contain the same transformative impulse as *Fight Club*, albeit couched in very different terms. Palahniuk is an author who takes his craft very seriously. His many reflective non-fiction pieces discussing his methods and the place of his fiction in the world demonstrate he has a keen belief in the power of writing to move the world and an interest in exploring alternatives to the capitalist status quo.

Just how successful is Palahniuk at imagining alternatives to contemporary capitalist ways of being? Can his fiction help to challenge capitalist subjectivities? What relationship exists between fiction and reality in the first place? This thesis aims to answer these questions by reading Palahniuk’s early novels alongside Marxist critical theory that is animated by a similar impulse towards social transformation; it argues that Palahniuk’s fiction does similar work to the Marxist theorists who attempt to grasp capitalism objectively and, in doing so, find ways to contest it. In particular, Frankfurt School theorist Erich Fromm plays an important role in this discussion. His analysis of how capitalism renders humans largely free from authoritarian coercion and control, and yet at the same time restricts them to very

narrow ways of being, strikes at the heart of one of the problems of tackling capitalism. That is, how can people free themselves from the social processes that shaped them? Or, to use the words of another theorist who is central to this thesis, how do humans “liberate themselves from themselves as well as from their masters?” (Marcuse, 1964/2002, p. 251). If Palahniuk is correct in seeing fiction as a ‘laboratory,’ then fiction can complement the theorists’ attempts to find answers to this question.

Rather than aspiring to the philosophical objectivity of a social theorist, Palahniuk’s novels are resolutely subjective, not only in that they are written by an author who has been shaped by the very capitalist landscape he seeks to critique but that they are written in a style that does not aim at the exact depiction of reality. Like the modernists that came before him, Palahniuk uses techniques that foreground subjective experience; first person narration, interior monologue and fragmentation. He also utilises satire, symbolism, hyperbole and irony. The result is overblown, exaggerated, fragmented worlds and characters. Indeed, it has been noted that Palahniuk’s fiction appears “to traffic specifically in the outrageous, the supposedly unimaginable” (Kavadlo, 2009, p. 103). Nonetheless, this outrageous and exaggerated fiction often manages to unveil aspects of neoliberal capitalism and successfully convey how it feels to live under it.

Palahniuk’s fiction has connected with many readers who, in their own diverse ways, are trying to do the same as the author; to comprehend their world and even potentially break free from its imperatives. This thesis sees a text as being situated in the nexus of author, reader and society. Fiction is a social phenomenon, both in that it rises out of a specific society and in that it joins an author and their readers. Palahniuk’s portrayal of main-character narrators who are trying to make sense of their world results in a triumvirate; narrator, author and reader are all in more-or-less the same position.

Despite the obvious earnestness and enthusiasm with which Palahniuk approaches his task, and his success in gaining a devoted readership, this project takes as one of its maxims Bertolt Brecht's assertion that "in art there is the fact of failure, and the fact of partial success" (1967/1977, p. 74). It is a rare piece of fiction that unproblematically, unambiguously and successfully challenges its society. Moreover, it is doubtful that any author or novel has the capacity to single-handedly effect engrained capitalist norms. Rather, all writing that aims to challenge capitalism is part of a collective effort to create incremental change.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to investigate how the oeuvre of one author engages with his society and resonates with a readership who can see their own experiences in the strange, hyperbolic and often ridiculous struggles of his characters. It will also investigate the potential for his oeuvre, and fiction more generally, to refract society; to aid in the creation of new ways of being and thus to contribute to the movement towards what Erich Fromm (1942/2001) called 'freedom to,' or the freedom for humans to develop ways of being outside of rigid capitalist rationalities.

The Author: Chuck Palahniuk

Chuck Palahniuk once declared that he agrees with

Roland Barthes' idea of the death of the author. People are going to bring their own body of knowledge, their own experience, to whatever. It is possibly going to be, for them, something in contradiction to what it was for you (Schuchardt, 2008, p. 2).

Contrary to Palahniuk's opinion, however, this thesis posits that in order to understand the role a work of fiction plays in society it is vital to take some account of the author; they cannot be laid to rest completely.

Chuck Palahniuk was born on the twenty-first of February 1962 and spent his formative years in the small town of Burbank, Washington (Chaplinsky, n.d.). Palahniuk's family were not wealthy; his father was an itinerant railway worker (Perry, 2014), his mother initially a homemaker and, later, a bookkeeper (Green, 2008). One of six children, Palahniuk spent his childhood living in a mobile home (Chaplinsky, n.d.). Having finished high school in Burbank, Palahniuk studied journalism at the University of Oregon, attaining a Bachelor of Arts in 1986 (Chaplinsky, n.d.).

Palahniuk had to support himself while he attended university, and he comments that “all through school, I worked night jobs as a movie projectionist or whatever. It threw me into a social life, a milieu, with all the other outcast kids – the night-people, the rejects. They became the best friends I ever had” (Green, 2008, para. 6). The apparent ease with which Palahniuk identifies with feeling as an outcast, and his fascination with spaces where ‘outcasts’ congregate, come across clearly in his novels. He has even explicitly cast himself in the role of the different or the ‘other,’ explaining that he sees his generation as “snarky because it was our default identity in the face of the earnestness of the hippies at Woodstock... We needed to be to be the reverse of the preceding generation” yet stating: “I want another option. I'm not going to live forever, so why not risk the ultimate transgression for my generation: to be sentimental and to be vulnerable” (Perry, 2014, para. 19).

Having received his bachelor's degree, Palahniuk worked as a journalist for a short time, then as a diesel mechanic until he began writing seriously in his mid-thirties. His success with *Fight Club* – for which he got an advance of six thousand dollars – was preceded by a time, between 1991 and 1996, when Palahniuk attended a weekly writers' workshop in Portland (Green, 2008). The workshop was taught by author Tom Spanbauer, and Palahniuk continues to list Spanbauer, along with other American writers such as Kurt Vonnegut, Bret Easton Ellis (Perry, 2014) and Amy Hempel (Palahniuk, 2004) as influences.

Along with references to these authors, his non-fiction work is interspersed with references to Foucault, Derrida, Jung and Heidegger (Palahniuk, 2004).

After finding success as a writer, Palahniuk's life changed dramatically. Reflecting on this, he explains that when he met his partner of over two decades "I was working at Freightliner, he was working stocking aircraft for an airline. We both had these very blue-collar lives, and now our lives are completely different" (Perry, 2014, para. 30). Palahniuk retains a strong awareness of his life before he was a wealthy celebrity author. Perhaps this influence is one of the reasons why his fiction has proven so accessible to a wide range of readers.

The sixteen novels that Palahniuk has written over the last twenty-two years read like a peculiarly modern-day chronicle, in that all of them focus on the experience of occupying contemporary society. So interrelated are they that they have been described as "one polyphonic, asynchronous, temporally bi-directional, hyper-textual, and cyber-encyclopaedic novel made up of individual novels" (Mendieta, 2005, p. 395).¹ Of these novels, the first published, *Fight Club* (1996) is also the most well-known. *Fight Club* was followed by *Survivor* (1999), *Invisible Monsters* (1999), *Choke* (2001), *Lullaby* (2002), *Diary* (2003) *Haunted* (2005), *Rant* (2007), *Snuff* (2008), *Pygmy* (2009), *Tell-All* (2010), *Damned* (2011), *Invisible Monsters Remix* (2012), *Doomed* (2013), *Beautiful You* (2014), and *Adjustment Day* (2018). Palahniuk is also a prolific writer of short stories and of non-fiction in the form of short essays, articles and editorials. Altogether, Palahniuk's novels have sold over five million copies (Penguin Random House, 2019).

Palahniuk admits that, due to his background in journalism, he approaches his fiction in the way a journalist approaches a subject and describes his habit of collecting stories as "an

¹ Mendieta's comment refers to the novels written up until 2005.

ongoing field study and that becomes whatever my next book is” (Rogan, 2018). For example, in order to research *Choke*, he went to group sex addiction therapy, called phone sex lines and sat with Alzheimer’s patients (Palahniuk, 2004). Describing other aspects of his writing process, Palahniuk explains that he is drawn to anecdotes that prompt people to respond with stories of their own. To see whether he should include an anecdote in his novels, he tests it by telling it to people. If people relate to one of Palahniuk’s anecdotes by telling their own, there is the possibility that he may then include it in one of his novels, a practice that, he admits, has challenged some of his friendships (Rogan, 2018). However, Palahniuk explains that, through this process, “you find yourself drawing from the experiences of dozens or hundreds or thousands of people” (Rogan, 2018). Accordingly, he observes that “it’s hard to call any of [his] novels ‘fiction’” (2004, xvii). Rather than seeing himself as a lone author in one-way communication with his readers, Palahniuk sees writing as a social process. For him, writing novels is at least partially about connecting with others through shared experience, something that is reflected not only in the anecdotes that appear regularly in Palahniuk’s fiction but in the way that he interacts with his readership.

Palahniuk makes himself very accessible to his readers. He has participated in Comic Con panels, Facebook Q & A, and in Reddit’s ‘Ask Me Anything’ (twice). The methods with which he engages with his fans – for Palahniuk is a celebrity author and has many fans as well as readers – are typified in the title of one of these Reddit posts, in which he introduces himself by saying ‘Hello, yo, hi, I’m Chuck Palahniuk the worst best bad writr. Neither can I spell or keyboard. Ask away’ (“*Hello*,” 2013). His interactions on Reddit garnered over two thousand likes and thousands of comments each. In them, he happily answered questions on topics including the ‘choruses’ in his work, the harshest criticism he has received and the most difficult book he has written, returning regularly to one of the threads in order to “mop up a few more questions” (“*Hello*,” 2013). More recently, a podcast he participated in with

controversial comedian Joe Rogan received over one million views on Youtube (Rogan, 2018). Braun and Squiers (2016), in a discussion of literary celebrity, explain that “people ascribe value to the sense of personal familiarity that owning a postcard picture or sharing the experience of seeing an author in the flesh at a reading event can provide” (Braun & Squiers, 2016). Palahniuk takes this a lot further, engaging with his fans directly on many different media and social media platforms and encouraging such a sense of familiarity by divulging personal details and being consistently, sometimes painfully, introspective and self-deprecating.

It is hard not to believe that the Palahniuk you read of on Reddit or see on *The Joe Rogan Experience* is the same as the actual man. The open, self-examining, self-deprecating person appears consistent across all forums, including his non-fiction work. This is an author who openly admits that he uses fiction as a form of therapy, explaining:

If you’re going to work on something as long as a novel, it has to explore some unresolved aspect of you, so that even if it never sells, never makes any money, never gets any attention, you still have a therapeutic benefit of fully exploring and exhausting that unresolved part of you.

(Harvkey, 2019, para. 15)

It appears that no topic is off limits for Palahniuk to either use in his fiction or discuss with his readers, something that makes his readers feel like they know him. For example, he willingly discusses his father’s violent death at the hands of a white supremacist, writing about it in *Stranger Than Fiction*, talking about it on the *Joe Rogan Podcast* and even mentioning it on Reddit, where he describes writing “a memorial album and history about [his] father's life and death,” as “torture” (Rogan, 2018). Many of his fans, especially those who have read *Stranger Than Fiction*, are aware that his family has a violent history; his grandfather killed his grandmother and committed suicide while his father, a child at the time, hid from him under the bed.

Other aspects of his life that Palahniuk is open about in his discussions with the media and his readers include his homosexuality, use of the tranquiliser Ambien, being ninety days sober (as of November 2019) and being asked to leave writers' workshops for making other writers feel unsafe. His willingness to open his life up to his readers, not only in his fiction and non-fiction but in his interviews and interactions, has garnered a significant amount of adulation amongst a particular demographic, who feel that they can joke with him, ask his advice and tell him their secrets – albeit in an open forum. His use of Reddit, Facebook and popular podcasts to interact with his readers reflects the fact that many of them are significantly younger than the 52-year-old author himself. It is possible part of the adulation he receives is a result of his fans, as is often the case with celebrity authors, “project[ing] their pleasure at finding their own experiences represented in creative works onto the unashamedly middlebrow, enthusiastically interactive author who writes entertaining, accessible fiction” (Braun & Squiers, 2016). The fact that, at their core, the novels portray the everyday quandaries of contemporary capitalist life supports such a reading of Palahniuk's celebrity. However, at times it seems like many of Palahniuk's readers like his books because they like the author himself, rather than the other way around.

Despite the strength of his fan-base, Palahniuk often appears as if he does not fully trust his own success. He has been famous for two decades, and has made millions of dollars from his writing, but he has also borne a lot of criticism and seems uneasy with his fame. He often talks of disappointing the people who have identified so strongly with his fiction, saying to Joe Rogan: “It's always a disappointment. It's always so heartbreaking. Because people expect somebody uh somebody so not me. And I'm constantly breaking their heart when they meet me” (Rogan, 2018). Similarly, in one Q & A he tells his fans: “I look forward to disappointing you all at a future date. If I overlooked your question it's not your fault. It's me. I'm a dick. I'll Shut Up Now” (“*Hello*,” 2013). He states that he thinks people

see him as a “degraded monster with no self-esteem whatsoever” (Rogan, 2018), because they associate him so strongly with the extreme characters in his novels. He even has a small argument with Rogan, who disagrees when he states that he is a “bad person” (Rogan, 2018). Listening to him, one gets the impression that he is always listening to himself, monitoring, analysing and second-guessing.

Palahniuk’s diligence in interacting with his fans and building a relatable public persona – regardless of the extent to which it reflects his real personality – illustrates his awareness of the need, as a working author in the twenty-first century, to create a ‘brand’ that stretches across many platforms. Indeed, this project argues that the need to self-brand is one of the key characteristics of neoliberal subjectivity. One commentator observes that Palahniuk is “keenly aware of his own status among his fans, actively promoting his writing and positioning himself as a celebrity author” (Hantke, 2009, p. 198). This personal brand, on which is based his connection to his readers, helps him sell books, but Palahniuk is always extending his brand. He started with novels and moved on to non-fiction, and in the last four years he also published a graphic novel version of *Fight Club*, *Fight Club 2* (2015), as well as two colouring books, *Bait: Off-Color Stories for You to Color* (2016) and *Legacy: An Off-Color Novella for You to Color* (2017). Recently, he mentioned in an interview that he was going to try writing for television (Harvkey, 2019). He also discusses the ways in which outside imperatives shape not only his brand but his fiction itself. Talking to Joe Rogan, he expresses regret about things he has said, worried that he is going to somehow get in trouble for them (Rogan, 2018). He not only self-censors in interviews but admits that authors in general have to self-censor in order to get published and to sell to a wide demographic, claiming that Barnes and Nobel would not give a book a ‘face out’ display if it had the word ‘fuck’ on the first page (Rogan, 2018). Thus, despite the impression he gives of being a completely open book, the ‘Palahniuk’ brand clearly takes some cultivation.

Selling his brand has become even more necessary for Palahniuk very recently. 2018 was a difficult year for him because he discovered that the accountant of his agency, who he worked with for twenty years, embezzled a significant amount of his money, which is unlikely to ever be recovered (“*The big secret*,” 2018, para. 8). In an open letter, characteristically posted on a fan website, Palahniuk writes: “this chain of events leaves me close to broke” (“*The big secret*,” 2018). He elaborates in his discussion with Rogan: “it was never my goal to be really rich...it was my goal to be a writer...poor is not something I’m afraid of. As long as I can write books I’ll be a happy person” (Rogan, 2018).

The fiction of Chuck Palahniuk explores the experiences of both the author himself and the people he encounters. In other words, it explores the experiences of the subject of contemporary capitalism from within contemporary capitalism. It has been said that “the representation of post-Fordist subjectivity is one of the most significant projects of contemporary cultural production” (Nilges, 2008, p. 63), and therefore Palahniuk’s fiction deserves more exploration. Because it is so subjective, Palahniuk’s articulation of contemporary capitalist experience is likely to be partial in both senses of the word; it is both limited and based on his own experiences, rather than universal. Yet many readers relate strongly to it.

To read Palahniuk’s interviews, short articles and first-person non-fiction is, at times, to be somewhat bewildered by contradictions. One of Palahniuk favourite writing mantras is “don’t stop before you hear the glass break” (Rogan, 2018) yet he worries that he bullies his audience by forcing them to read challenging things (Rogan, 2018). He says that is “glorious” to hear his own words “echoed in the culture” (Rogan, 2018) yet admits that if he knew his life was going to turn into a litany of book readings and publicity rounds he may not have started writing in the first place (Rogan, 2018). He has a large fanbase and has sold millions

of books, yet he often appears to be afraid, somewhat justifiably, that failure is imminent. He is a millionaire, celebrity author, who is “close to broke” (“The big secret,” 2018). He wants to push social boundaries but finds himself hemmed in by the imperatives of his publisher and the necessity for a working author to sell books. He appears to be open and genuine and is, at the same time, a brand. Indeed, Chuck Palahniuk embodies certain challenges of our times – especially those of how to be a human being and an economic being at the same time, and how to free ourselves from the rationalities and systems that our own behaviours reinforce – and this project will develop the idea that his work, likewise, exemplifies these challenges.

Literary commentary

Much of the commentary on Palahniuk’s novels focuses on how they elucidate or interact with the challenges of capitalism and capitalist rationality; a topic that is closely related to the concerns of this project. Thus, this section will discuss how different commentators have regarded Palahniuk’s work, the arguments that have been put forward as to how Palahniuk attempts to challenge capitalist rationalities with his writing, and the discussion of whether such challenges are viable.

The content of this discussion reflects that a significant majority of the critical discussion of Palahniuk’s work focuses solely on his first-published and most well-known novel, *Fight Club* (1996). Even commentators writing a decade or more after the publication of this novel focus on it rather than Palahniuk’s other work, though *Invisible Monsters* (1999), *Survivor* (1999) and, to a lesser extent, *Choke* (2001) and *Lullaby* (2002) have all garnered some critical engagement. It is more difficult to find articles on Palahniuk’s later novels (those published after 2010), perhaps because they are in many ways more difficult to engage with and have proven less popular overall than the early novels. Furthermore, finding

articles that take a more extensive view of Palahniuk's oeuvre, situating it more definitively in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century that it so obviously emerges from and examines, proves a difficult task; one of the aims of this project is to contribute to remedying this under-theorisation of Palahniuk's work. However, the critical discussion of *Fight Club*'s critique of capitalism and its attempts at resisting capitalist rationalities remains relevant to this thesis and its exploration of the role fiction can play in challenging established ways of being. Thus, I will first discuss the commentary on *Fight Club* before moving on to a more general discussion of the commentary on the other novels.

Most straightforwardly, much of the critical response to *Fight Club* sees it as offering social commentary of contemporary capitalist American society, and, by extension of this, commentary on the plight of the contemporary subject of capitalism. There is significant disagreement on the quality of Palahniuk's capitalist critique in this novel, however. Some commentators argue that the capitalist critique contained in *Fight Club* is overly simplistic; *Fight Club* has been described as "Marxism for dummies" (Diken and Laustsen, 2002, p. 361), and "superficial" (Giroux, 2001, p. 5).² Henry Giroux takes particular exception to the angle of the capitalist critique in *Fight Club*, criticising it for "ignor[ing] issues surrounding the break up of labor unions, the slashing of the U.S work force, extensive plant closings, downsizing, outsourcing, the elimination of the welfare state, the attack on people of color, and the growing disparities between rich and poor" (Giroux, 2001, p. 13). This latter criticism is particularly pertinent in that it contains the premise that literature *should* address these things and is reminiscent of György Lukács' insistence, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, that literature should offer an objective overview of the

² Giroux's commentary relates to the film version of *Fight Club* but because the aspects of the plot that he critiques are identical to the plot of the novel I decided to include him in this discussion.

mechanisms of capitalist society, as opposed to focusing on the individual subject (1938/1977). However, contrary to Giroux's criticism, this project takes the position that the subjective view of Palahniuk's is an equally valuable vehicle for better understanding contemporary life as an objective, overarching depiction of capitalism. In this it aligns with commentators like Jordan (2002), who finds value in Palahniuk's overall message that "action" must be taken to disrupt "dehumanising" capitalism (Jordan, 2002, p. 368), and Bennett (2005), who argues that it is an "exploration of social alienation and the human condition" which aims to "open up new possibilities for human freedom" (p. 74).

Another source of debate is *Fight Club*'s portrayal of spaces that ostensibly aim to challenge capitalism, the most prominent of these being the fight clubs themselves. Some commentators have argued that, during fight club, the physical body is a site of resistance to capitalist rationalities. Such readings were potentially inspired by both Palahniuk's discussions of his work and Slavoj Žižek's discussion of the *Fight Club* film in "The Ambiguity of the Masochist Social Link" (2003). According to Žižek, during fight club the body experiences physical violence, but more importantly, it experiences physical contact. Žižek argues that the aim of this contact is "to suspend the fundamental abstraction and coldness of the capitalist subjectivity best exemplified by the figure of the lone monadic individual who, alone in front of the PC screen, communicates with the entire world" (2003, p. 116). The various features of the capitalist subject, "the abstraction, the foreclosure of the others, the blindness for the others' suffering and pain" are thus "broken" (Žižek, 2003, p. 116) in the unmediated, authentic moment of contact with another person. Žižek reads the experiences of the physical body as allowing the individual to escape from their instrumental capitalist rationality and enter a new, more authentic way of being. A similar version of this argument posits that the injuries and pain experienced by the fighters in fight clubs "jolt

participants back into an immediate connection with a primal, fully-embodied...more genuine existence” (Burgess, 2012, p. 265).

On the other hand, Henry Giroux finds little potential in the representation of men fighting each other, arguing that this scenario simply replicates one of the key aspects of capitalism, “hyper-individualism” (Giroux, 2001, p. 12), in that the fighting re-casts the men as competitive, lone subjects. Thus, while the fight clubs may spring from a transformative impulse, they offer little real challenge to capitalism. A similar point of view positions the novel’s ‘fight club’ as less a community in which people can connect with each other than an organisation that “isolates its participants” because “pain, rather than the other participants, is the primary experience” (Pettus, 2000, p. 119). Since capitalism itself isolates and individualises its subjects, rather than being a pioneering space where the men can develop new ways of being fight club just reinforces the isolation of capitalism.

Ultimately, Giroux finds fault in *Fight Club*’s representation of, and apparent endorsement of, the “immediacy of pleasure, the cult of hyper-competitiveness, and the market-driven desire of winning and exercising power over others” (Giroux, 2001, p. 15). Anyone studying Palahniuk’s work must admit the fairness in the suggestion that many aspects of this particular novel serve to “substantially reinforce” the capitalist system that Palahniuk set out to critique (Pettus, 2000, p. 125). The idea that many of the ways in which Palahniuk’s characters enact their escapes from capitalism often end up replicating capitalist norms will be further developed in a later chapter, as part of a wider discussion of how Palahniuk’s novels demonstrate the difficulty of imagining alternatives outside our normalised ways of being.

When a more extensive account of Palahniuk’s oeuvre is taken, it begins to become clear that many of the novels urge subjective change; indeed, this is one of the key

contentions of this thesis. It has been noted that *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters*, *Survivor* and *Lullaby*, all focus on “traumatized protagonists” who, finding themselves trapped in lives defined material possession and socio-economic status, undergo either metaphorical or literal journeys – sometimes both – to “rid themselves of their old identities” (Collado-Rodriguez, 2013b, p. 620), and this dynamic occurs in most of the later novels, too. Similarly, Baelo-Allue (2013) describes Palahniuk’s journeys as “physical movement through space, but also inner psychological travel in terms of identity and self-discovery” (p. 134). It has also been argued that many of the novels are about the quest for an authentic self, about “unmaking, uncoupling, and disentangling our selves from the normal self into which we have been socialized” (Mendieta, 2005, p. 395). The characters that populate these novels are disillusioned with their societies but there is no formal collective for them to turn to. Thus, they must take on the responsibility for changing themselves. Finally, there is broad agreement that Palahniuk’s novels deliberately speak out to the reader, “urg[ing] beholders of the glass to see their own faces and change themselves, rather than their institutions” (Lee, 2012, p. 10) and attempting to reveal to the reader those things “we dare not admit to ourselves” (Hourigan, 2010, p. 26). In concurring with the position of these commentators, this project also aims to extend their ideas, exploring how Palahniuk encourages the reader to “see their own faces,” how he reveals things about our society that we would rather not see, and whether seeing ourselves and our society more clearly can offer any hope for individual, social and political transformation.

A final important perspective to address is the idea that Palahniuk’s books depict fringe communities in order to experiment with new, anticapitalist, ways of being. The aforementioned discourse around whether *Fight Club* is a site of resistance is part of this discussion, but other communities also feature in it. It has been proposed, for example, that the support groups in *Fight Club* suggest both the value of “open[ing] up to the other in

dialogue” and the possibility of “building something together” (de Rocha, 2005, p. 112). It has also been noted that many of his novels hinge on “a new (and expectedly absurd) way for humans to find genuine community and transparency for one another” (Schuchardt, 2008, p. 6). A similar theme is present in the work of Kavadlo (2005), who argues that “each novel...ultimately proposes that what their characters, and all of us, need is – love” (2005, p. 6). Though prevalent, such readings are rather idealistic, especially considering how contradictory, dysfunctional and even oppressive Palahniuk’s communities and relationships often are – a point that will be developed in chapter six of this thesis. A more nuanced reading is that the portrayal of community in Palahniuk’s work positions community as less of a site of resistance or freedom and more of a balm for the subject of capitalism. From this perspective, the novels are simply “advocating a human connection that improves the lived experience” (Lee, 2012, p. 2), the communities in the novels “play a soothing part” (Collado-Rodriguez, 2013b, p. 635) in capitalist life, and the characters find comfort with others that they can “commiserate” with (de Rocha, 2005, p. 114). For characters whose lives seem to reflect the grim situation of the human subject in capitalist society, human affection and love are “indispensable” (Mendieta, 2005, p. 404), not just as a means of resistance or collective transformation, but as a means of ameliorating the loneliness and sadness of living in capitalist life. This perspective, too, will be developed in this thesis, when I discuss the ways in which Palahniuk’s characters use others instrumentally as a kind of coping mechanism in their capitalist worlds.

One thing that should be clear from the commentary on Palahniuk’s work is that many critics have read his novels as enacting political work, or at the very least failing in their attempts to do this. I will build on the work of the commentators discussed in this section in investigating how Palahniuk’s work fits into a much wider process of attempting to more deeply understand contemporary society, unveil often-unseen mechanisms of capitalist power

and control and explore alternative possibilities – sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing to truly break away from capitalist rationalities.

The Novels

Nine of Palahniuk's novels feature in this thesis, together representing thirteen years of Palahniuk's work (from 1996 to 2009). *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters*, *Survivor* and *Choke* feature particularly heavily, appearing in most of the chapters. This is no coincidence; as Palahniuk's first four written and published novels, these are stylistically and thematically very similar. Indeed, there are many stylistic similarities across all of the novels that feature in this project: they are all non-linear, fragmented narratives, that often utilise flashbacks; many of them feature a secret that the reader is not party to and neither is the narrator; and the majority of them are predominantly written from the first-person perspective. All of the novels end with at least some ambiguity, and the first three novels begin and end with the same scene. The only one of Palahniuk's first ten novels to be excluded from this project is *Diary* (2003), which is quite different to the others in tone. None of the latter novels have been included, largely because I believe they represent a change in Palahniuk's content, style and approach that is out of the scope of this thesis. The reasons for and implications of this change of approach is a definite area for further critical engagement and investigation.

Fight Club (1996)

Palahniuk's most famous novel focuses on an unnamed narrator who, at least at the beginning of the novel, appears to be nothing but a friendless 'corporate drone.' His status as a middle-class professional is represented by his apartment, which is crammed with furniture from IKEA and stylish but meaningless decorative objects. The narrator, miserable with his

empty corporate-capitalist existence, develops insomnia, and attends self-help groups to deal with this, at least temporarily, and to find the human contact that he craves.

When the narrator meets Tyler Durden, his life changes. Captivated by Tyler's anti-capitalist and anti-establishment rhetoric, he moves in with Tyler and the two men create fight club, a place where men can go to escape their normal lives. As he gains more power as the unofficial leader of fight club, Tyler's rhetoric begins to transform and the relatively innocuous fight club morphs into Project Mayhem, an organisation whose aim is to build a new world – after destroying the old one. The narrator, however, becomes horrified at the dangerous and criminal tactics of Project Mayhem and when a man loses his life, he tries to leave the organisation. At this point, the reader discovers, along with the narrator, that Tyler is an invention of the narrator's; an alternate personality. Despite this, it is impossible to shut down Project Mayhem completely, as the efficient organisation can operate without its leader.

The novel ends ambiguously, with the narrator in a mental institution. While the narrator is hopeful that upon his release, he will be able to build a new life for himself, he also mentions that many of the people he encounters still call him 'Mr. Durden.'

Invisible Monsters (1999)

This novel, which is written in an even more fragmented style than is usual for Palahniuk, follows the narrator, Shannon, who is the 'invisible monster' of the story. A former model, Shannon has recently shot herself in the face to escape the vacuous and superficial world of fashion. She is thus unable to speak and hides her disfigurement behind veils.

In the hospital for reconstruction surgery, Shannon meets Brandy Alexander, who assures her that her life is just a story she can write. A road trip ensues, in which Shannon and Brandy drive across North America. Along the way, Shannon discovers that Brandy Alexander is in fact her estranged brother, who had been rejected by their conservative parents for his homosexuality. Shane is also trying to escape something: the social norms and expectations of masculinity. Shannon and Shane try to understand their shared, damaging past and, through flashbacks, the reader in turn develops more of an understanding of these characters.

The final pages of the novel portray Shane in hospital, undergoing the final surgery needed for his gender reassignment; after much uncertainty he has decided to complete it. Shannon, too, has decided to move into the future and make a new life for herself. As she leaves the Shane's hospital room, she leaves her veils behind, signalling that she is determined to accept her disfigurement.

Survivor (1999)

Survivor is paginated backwards, so page one is the last page of the novel. The first-person narrator of this novel is Tender, a member of the Creedish Church, who has been sent out into American society to work. Tender is employed as a housekeeper and spends his time completing the never-ending list of tasks that his employers give him to do. During this time, he meets his love-interest Fertility Hollis, and becomes desperate to impress her.

All the other Creedish commit suicide, and Tender is propelled to stardom; he becomes a religious celebrity. However, happiness eludes Tender; he finds being a celebrity exhausting and is ultimately forced to perform miracles to keep his fans' attention. Fortunately, Fertility can help him with this, as she has the gift of prophecy.

When a murder occurs, Tender finds himself a suspect in the police investigation. Thus, he becomes a fugitive, traversing the country with Fertility and his twin brother, Adam, who is also still alive. As well as to evade the police, the purpose of this road trip is to enable Tender to divest himself of his celebrity identity; he gains weight, his skin deteriorates, and he stops showering.

The novel ends (and begins) with Tender in a hijacked plane flying over Australia. The plane has run out of fuel and as final engine flames out Tender and the plane plunge to the earth. Although the novel ends with the plane's impact, there is the suggestion that, with the aid of Fertility, Tender may have been able to survive.

Choke (2001)

Choke follows dysfunctional narrator Victor Mancini, who has numerous life problems. He is in financial difficulty from paying for his elderly, estranged mother's rest home; he is a sex addict who finds his partners at his twelve step meetings; he loathes his underpaid job at the tourist attraction Colonial Dunsboro. In order to get extra money, Victor pretends to choke on food at restaurants, forcing the people around him to 'save' him. Victor tells himself that this as a mutually beneficial relationship; Victor gets regular gifts of money from these people, who now feel connected to him, while in turn he allows these people to feel like they have done some good in the world.

Things change for Victor when he meets his mother's doctor, Paige Marshall. He becomes obsessed with Paige, in part because he cannot have sex with her. When Victor discovers his mother's diary, which is written in Italian, Paige tells him that she can translate it. Subsequently, she reveals to Victor that his was an immaculate conception. Victor starts to believe he is Jesus.

Towards the end of the novel, the characters' secrets begin to be exposed and they are no longer able to hide behind the stories they had invented for themselves. Victor finds out that Paige Marshall is not actually a doctor but rather a patient from the psychiatric ward of the hospital – who cannot speak Italian. Those who Victor had deceived by pretending to choke discover that he had been lying all along. The novel ends on a hopeful note, with Victor, Paige and two friends building an unidentified structure with stone.

Lullaby (2002)

Carl Streator, the narrator of *Lullaby*, is a lonely, grieving journalist whose wife and son have both recently died. While doing research for a story on crib death, Streator finds evidence that a 'culling song' published in a volume of children's nursery rhymes has been killing those who hear it. Streator realises he must track down and destroy every copy of the book in order to save the world from the culling song. However, he first accidentally, then deliberately, kills a number of people with it. The police become suspicious of Streator, so he goes on the run, evading the police and at the same time finding and destroying all copies of the culling song.

Real estate agent Helen Hoover Boyle becomes Streator's companion on his quest to find all the copies of the book. They are joined by Helen's unconventional assistant Mona, and Mona's boyfriend, Oyster. Oyster is a radical environmentalist, so Streator must make sure he does not get access to the culling song in case he uses it to destroy the human race. Furthermore, the group are also looking for the 'grimoire,' the book of spells from which the culling song originally came. The search turns into a race as Streator and Helen try to find both the copies of the culling song and the grimoire before the more immature and unpredictable Mona and Oyster do.

Unfortunately, Mona and Oyster manage to attain the grimoire, and, after much casting of spells, Helen becomes stuck inhabiting the body of a detective who was hunting Streator. At the end of the novel, Streator and 'Helen' are still in love and are searching for Oyster and Mona, who are using the grimoire to further their extreme environmentalist agenda.

Haunted (2005)

The narrator of *Haunted* is not only never named but takes little part in the action. This novel focuses on seventeen characters who go on a ninety-day long writers' retreat organised by someone called Mr. Whittier. The main plot of the novel follows the events that occur during the retreat, but more information about each of the characters is revealed as the novel progresses, because as well as main plot, each chapter of the book contains both a short story and a poem focusing on the background of one of the characters. The characters are known by nicknames given to them by the narrator, for example, Lady Baglady, Miss Sneezzy and Saint Gut-Free, and these nicknames also link to their backstories.

The would-be writers are all locked inside an old theatre building together for their retreat. Soon it becomes obvious that each of them aspires to write a sensational memoir. Slowly, they each start taking increasingly extreme measures in order to portray themselves as the tragic victim of the writers' retreat gone-wrong, sabotaging the food supply, the heating and even the main door to the outside world. The characters then begin to turn on each other, each seeking a villain for the best-selling memoir they envisage.

One by one, the characters die, some through accident or illness, and some by suicide. Realising that every dead person is one less person with whom the proceeds of the memoir needed to be shared, the remaining characters even begin killing each other. After three

months has passed, Mr. Whittier unlocks the doors and tells the participants they are free to go. Yet the deranged characters are so intent on the storyline they crafted for themselves that they insist on locking themselves back in the theatre.

Rant (2007)

The premise of *Rant* is that it is a biography of Buster Casey, otherwise known as Rant. It is revealed early in the novel that Rant is already deceased, and his story is told by multiple friends and acquaintances, as well as by academics who analyse his actions through the lens of their disciplines. At times, these witnesses to Rant's life contradict each other, and at other times they embellish his story; it becomes difficult to tell the facts of Rant's life from the myth that has grown up around him.

Rant is from a small rural town called Middleton, which most of the young people cannot wait to escape. When Rant finally manages to leave Middleton and go to the city, it becomes apparent that the novel is set in a dystopian world where there are two distinct classes; Daytimers and Nighttimers. As their names suggest, the Daytimers are the well-off people who are at liberty during the day, while the Nighttimers must stay home during the day and are only allowed out at night. As part of his rebellion against these strict and unjust conditions, Rant joins the Party Crashers, a group of Nighttimers who have made a game out of engaging in car chases and crashes, to both rebel and to feel more alive.

Eventually the reason so many people are talking about Rant's story revealed; after he died in a party crashing event his body was discovered to be missing from the mangled car. This leads some of his biographers to speculate that Rant's death in a high-speed crash gave him the power of time-travel. However, even as these possibilities are suggested to the reader

by some of Rant's biographers, doubt is cast on them by others, and the ultimate truth of Rant's life and death cannot reliably be ascertained.

Snuff (2008)

Snuff is set almost entirely backstage of a pornography shoot where aging porn star Cassie Wright is attempting to reinvigorate her career by taking part in a record-breaking gang bang. The story is told via the narration of three male participants, known as Mr. 72, Mr. 137 and Mr. 600, as well as by Sheila, Cassie Wright's personal assistant.

As the novel progresses, more personal details of the four narrators are revealed. The insecure teenager, Mr. 72, suspects Cassie is his mother, and has come to save her from her life of porn. Mr. 137, a TV detective whose series has been cancelled, has not seen his father since he told him he was gay. Mr. 600, professional porn star, lured Cassie into porn when she was young, and subsequently fathered her child. Feminist Sheila is contemptuous of both the men and Cassie Wright herself. Rumours begin to spread that the men are participating in a snuff film; Cassie has decided to commit suicide at the end of shooting so that she can leave the proceeds of the film to the baby she gave up for adoption.

The truth about these characters and their relationships is eventually completely exposed. Sheila, real name Zelda Zonk, is Cassie Wright's child by Mr. 600. The film does indeed turn out to be a snuff film, and both Cassie Wright and Mr. 600 commit suicide. With her parents both dead, it appears that Zelda Zonk will finally be able reconcile herself to her origins and the novel ends hopefully, with Zelda revealing to the paramedics both her real name and the fact she was their child.

Pygmy (2009)

Pygmy is written in a stilted, inaccurate English that is meant to mimic the narrator, Pygmy's, accent. Pygmy does not speak English as his first language but comes to America, as part of a larger group, as an exchange student. Pygmy's home country is never named, but it is apparent that he is from a totalitarian socialist regime. He and the other 'exchange students' are actually secret operatives, with instructions to kill everyone the United States.

The Cedar family take Pygmy into their home as their homestay student, however, Pygmy hates all of them except for his host sister. As a secret agent, Pygmy participates in all aspects of American society; he goes to the mall, goes to Church, contributes to the model United Nations, competes in spelling bees and sings in the Junior Swing Choir. Throughout the novel, there are flashbacks to the harsh life he endured in his home country, in which he was taken away from his parents as a child, had small animals killed in front of him, lived with the threat of being killed if he was not a good enough agent, and was indoctrinated with state ideology.

Though he continues to reiterate his hatred of America, over time the ideology of his home country loses its influence over Pygmy. He even becomes a local hero when he uses his martial arts skills to incapacitate a school shooter. At the end of the novel, Pygmy, by this stage in love with his host sister, thwarts the plan to topple America. The novel ends with Pygmy being formally adopted by the Cedar family, proud to become an American.

Liberating Ourselves From Ourselves

As will be clear from the descriptions of the novels, the plots of Palahniuk's novels are usually outrageous and unrealistic. However, throughout this project I explore their

potential to, at the very least, bring Palahniuk's reader to a greater understanding of capitalist society. To do this I draw on both capitalist critiques and theories of literature.

The first chapter of this thesis, 'What is Normally Not Spoken is Said,' establishes its theoretical framework. It begins with a discussion of the features of the contemporary iteration of capitalism in Anglo-American countries – often referred to as neoliberalism – and investigates what it is that sets neoliberal capitalism apart from other forms of capitalism. Then, it examines the subject of neoliberal capitalism, and, following theorists such as Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2013), establishes the features by which the neoliberal subject can be distinguished. Next, it discusses how Marxist theorists, and particularly the Frankfurt School theorists, have argued that literature can meet the challenges of capitalist rationality and capitalist subjectivity. The ideas of Herbert Marcuse, in particular, are useful in this exploration of how contemporary, non-realist fiction such as Palahniuk's has the potential to stimulate resistance to capitalist ways of being.

Chapter two of this thesis, 'The Past is Dead, the Future is Unimaginable,' argues that aspects of what Mark Fisher (2009) terms 'capitalist realism' are revealed in a number of Palahniuk's novels. Under capitalist realism, historicity has waned and the past repeats itself in empty representations; Fredric Jameson's pastiche and Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum. This lack of historical context makes present conditions very difficult to analyse and challenge. Furthermore, the ubiquitous media helps to shore up capitalist realism, reinforcing the feeling that it is a closed system. The various media break the present down into short episodes, one result of which is the appearance of an eternal present in which the future becomes harder and harder to imagine. This chapter explores the idea that developing an understanding of how capitalist realism forecloses people's ability to imagine coherent

alternatives is an important step for anyone wanting to challenge capitalism, and whether Palahniuk's hyperbolic fiction successfully unveils aspects of capitalist realism to his reader.

Chapter three, 'The Features of the Extraordinary,' draws parallels between Palahniuk's characters and the contemporary neoliberal subject, developing the argument that Palahniuk's fiction aptly unveils the situation of the lonely and disconnected neoliberal subject. This chapter primarily draws on Erich Fromm's *The Fear of Freedom* (1942), a key text for this project, to delineate the effects of capitalism on human relationships. In *The Fear of Freedom*, Fromm argues that capitalism renders its subject simultaneously independent and isolated. I supplement Fromm's arguments with contemporary neoliberal theory, such as that of Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2013) in order to demonstrate how the astute observations made by Fromm are still relevant to contemporary neoliberalism. Furthermore, I draw on Herbert Marcuse's ideas, largely expressed in "The Aesthetic Dimension" (1977/1978) about how fiction can challenge reality, not by portraying it exactly, but by taking commonplace practices and values and making them seem extraordinary, arguing that this is what Palahniuk's fiction does in regards to the disconnection and isolation of the neoliberal subject.

Chapter four, 'It's what we do; turn ourselves into objects,' builds on the ideas presented in the previous chapter in order to argue that Palahniuk's hyperbolic and outrageous characters, who desperately sell every aspect of themselves, estrange the reader, allowing them the distance to subsequently recognise that the characters are acting in very commonplace ways. This chapter focuses on the ways in which instrumental reason has permeated all aspects of life, necessitating the commodification of all human attributes and activities. In order to explore this, it draws on the work of Max Horkheimer (1947/2013) and his argument that instrumental reason has replaced objective reason, as well as György

Lukács' (1923/1971) concept of reification, enquiring whether the act of reading fiction such as Palahniuk's can allow the reader to recognise how they are acting instrumentally in their own lives, and potentially enable them to view the conditions of capitalism more objectively.

The fifth chapter, 'The Ruins of the Future,' investigates Luc Boltanski's (2002) argument that the freedoms that the Left of the 1960s demanded – change, fluidity and flexibility – have been emptied of their revolutionary potential under the 'new spirit' of capitalism. Instead, under neoliberalism, or what is referred to, following Zygmunt Bauman, as Liquid Capitalism or Liquid Modernity in this chapter, flexibility, adaptability and fluidity have become injunctions. The subject of Liquid Capitalism must become liquid themselves, following the market and changing into whatever shape the market expects them to be. This has left the subject bereft, yearning for a sense of authenticity and searching for a way to stabilise themselves, a dynamic evident in Palahniuk's novels. While some commentators have argued that the changes that Palahniuk's characters enact on themselves – particularly changes in the body, the appearance and the personality – are liberating, this chapter explores a different point of view. Namely, it investigates the idea that, as embracing constant change is a key part of Liquid Modern subjectivity, the changes the characters enact are less liberatory than indicative of the bind the Liquid Capitalist subject finds themselves in.

Finally, the sixth chapter, 'Transforming the Field of Possibility,' returns to Erich Fromm's *Fear of Freedom*. In this chapter, I critique the oft-proposed idea that the power of Palahniuk's fiction is in its depiction of small communities, instead arguing that almost all of the relationships and communities portrayed in the novels are dysfunctional, and can best be understood as what Fromm describes as 'secondary bonds'; attempts to escape the isolation and fear engendered by being an individual in a capitalist world. Rather, this chapter

considers the idea that, aside from its capacity to allow the reader to see the conditions of their society more clearly, Palahniuk's fiction works on the reader in two ways. Firstly, following Herbert Marcuse, it contains moments of existentialism, which break through the routine of the reader's capitalist life. Secondly, following one of the strategies of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre, Palahniuk's ambiguous endings disrupt the reader's expectations for a simple denouement, leaving them with open questions about their society and even with the desire to imagine new, different endings; the first step in imagining new ways of being.

It is not my intention, in outlining the ways in which Palahniuk's work is valuable, to suggest that his work is wholly or unambiguously successful, or that Palahniuk, as an author, somehow has access to knowledge and understanding of his society that the reader does not have access to, or that he bequeaths his reader this knowledge through his fiction. On the contrary, I have set out to explore how one person is able to discover their world through fiction, and how this fiction is able to in turn have an impact on his readers.

In the famous quote from 1984, used as the epigraph to this introduction, the fictional character Winston Smith writes in his diary: "Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious" (Orwell, 1949, p. 74). This encapsulates the dilemma faced by anyone exploring the prospect of freedom from capitalist rationalities, and the freedom to act as spontaneous individuals. How can capitalism be challenged when many people are not aware that they have been shaped in its image in the first place? How can capitalist subjectivities be challenged while capitalism still exerts such an influence over most people, almost everyone?

More than ever, it seems as if the global web of capitalist rationality is being tightened around the subject of capitalism. Any search for viable alternatives to capitalism must address not only the question of what an alternative system would look like but how to create the

desire for change within people who have been shaped in the image of capitalism itself. Finding methods of addressing this problem from outside the political sphere is especially vital, in light of research that suggests that politicised online spaces such as Twitter actually further cement people's views and serve to further polarise the right and the left (Hong & Kim, 2016). Real subjective change is unlikely to occur during an online argument. This thesis positions fiction as having potential a role to play in individuals becoming 'conscious,' being 'liberated' or finding true freedom; it positions fiction as a potentially productive vehicle for subjective change. But how can fiction play such a role, and how does Palahniuk's fiction, in particular, contribute to such a process? The exploration of these questions is central to this project.

What is Normally Not Spoken is Said: Literature's role in challenging capitalism

As this project focuses on how Palahniuk's writing both unveils contemporary capitalism and operates within its sphere, it is necessary to delineate contemporary capitalism, the contemporary capitalist subject and the relationship between literature and society. This chapter will thus discuss, firstly, the parameters of contemporary capitalism – or what has also been called neoliberalism, multinational capitalism and late capitalism amongst other things. It will also briefly explain how today's capitalism is different from previous iterations of capitalism. Next, it will describe the subject of contemporary capitalism and explore the impact of capitalism on the individual living within it. Finally, it will examine Marxist theories on the relationship between literature and society, focusing in particular on theorists' discussions of how literature can challenge dominant ways of being and what kind of literature is required for such a task.

The Neoliberal Capitalist Context

The term *neoliberalism* has somewhat fallen out of style in recent years, perhaps in part due to the vehement disagreement it generates, not only between its proponents and detractors but between those who agree that it is problematic and aim to critique it. Terry Flew (2014) has argued, for example, that neoliberalism has been misused as an “all-purpose denunciatory category” (p. 51) and overused as the “underlying source and explanation of everything” (p. 53). Even prominent neoliberal theorist Wendy Brown concedes that neoliberalism is “a loose and shifting signifier,” a concept that can be difficult to pin down because while it influences all areas of the globe, it manifests differently in different places (Brown, 2015, p. 20). Despite these valid points on the issues with theorising neoliberalism, it remains the label used by many contemporary theorists to distinguish the type of capitalism

that was initiated in the early 1980s under Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States from the capitalisms that came before it. Indeed, this is how it has been used by neoliberal theorists such as the aforementioned Wendy Brown (2005; 2015), David Harvey (2005), and Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2013), who despite disagreeing on some aspects of neoliberalism's theorisation all see the term *neoliberalism* as providing a useful label that serves to indicate the uniqueness of contemporary capitalism. Following these theorists, I employ the terms 'neoliberalism' and 'neoliberal capitalism' in this project in order to denote the specific iteration of capitalism that predominates today, as well as its rationality.

Neoliberal capitalism emerged in the early 1980s, provoked, according to Harvey (2005), by what were then widely seen as the failures of the social-state 'Keynesian' economics, which focused on welfare, public assets and state regulation of the market (p. 10). By the 1970s these policies seemed to have resulted in high inflation, high unemployment and rancorous union disputes. Looking for an alternative economic model, many saw neoliberalism, with its focus on individual freedom, competition and responsibility, as an ideal economic model. Subsequently, though it has not been taken up equally in all countries across the globe, neoliberalism has touched almost all of them to some extent (Harvey, 2005, p. 3).

The essential premise of neoliberalism is that the more wealth is generated, the better everyone will fare; an idea that is more popularly known, and derided, as the 'trickle down' theory (Harvey, 2005, p. 64). Aiming to "disembed capital" from "constraints" (Harvey, 2005, p. 11), neoliberalism advocates for free trade, deregulation and strong private property rights, an example of the latter in practise being the sale of social housing to individuals (Brown, 2005; Harvey, 2005, p. 20). In theory, neoliberalism allows each individual the

freedom to make their fortune in the marketplace, while being responsible for their own welfare and happiness (Harvey, 2005, p. 65), a dynamic that is portrayed as liberating and exciting, in contrast to the restrictions of the social state (Dardot & Laval, 2013).

It has been noted that “transformations of this scope and depth do not occur by accident” (Harvey, 2005, p. 1). Indeed, one of the most important features of neoliberalism is the fact that it is a constructivist project (Brown, 2005, p. 40). Various tactics were used by governments of different countries in order to gain the consent of the populace to these changes. According to Harvey (2005), one such tactic was the appeal to the aforementioned idea of ‘individual freedom’ (p. 41), an idea that has been so successfully disseminated it has become common sense; to many people, neoliberalism, with its valorisation of competition, individual choice and personal responsibility, is “a necessary, even wholly ‘natural,’ way for the social order to be regulated” (Harvey, 2005, p. 41). Brown, too, argues that neoliberalism has come to appear as “sophisticated common sense” (2015, p. 35) while Dardot and Laval describe it as having become the “*form of our existence*” (2013, p. 3). This appearance of naturalness and inevitability is a key feature of neoliberalism.

Having initially constructed neoliberalism through various policies, the state plays a significant role in its perpetuation. In fact, it can be said that the state takes an active part in re-structuring itself along neoliberal lines (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 5), relinquishing to private suppliers the control of public assets such as water and telecommunications, public institutions such as schools and prisons, and even social supports such as social housing and healthcare (Harvey, 2005, p. 60). Yet at the same time, one of the key principles of neoliberalism is ostensibly that, aside from ensuring the conditions for neoliberalism to thrive, the state should not interfere in the market (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). Somewhat inconsistently, the neoliberal market must be left alone while simultaneously “directed,

buttressed, and protected by law and policy as well as by the dissemination of social norms” (Brown, 2005, p. 41). Indeed, neoliberalism has received an enormous amount of criticism for its many contradictions, among other things.

It has already been stated that neoliberalism is based on ideas of competition, privatisation, free trade and deregulation. Another way it has been described is as “a range of monetary and social policies favourable to business and indifferent toward poverty, social deracination, cultural decimation, long-term resource depletion, and environmental destruction” (Brown, 2005, p. 38). It has been widely observed that economic inequality has grown considerably over the last three decades, and the discrepancy between what was promised by neoliberal theory and what has been delivered by actual neoliberalism is so large that it has led David Harvey to charge it with having been a project to consolidate the power and wealth of the upper class all along (2005, p. 16). However, another perspective offered by Dardot and Laval is that such a ‘classical Marxist’ approach commits a “fallacy in identifying the beneficiary of the crime with its author” (2013, p. 8). The already-wealthy benefit disproportionately from neoliberalism but that does not mean there is a “large-scale conspiracy” (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 9). Rather, they argue convincingly that neoliberalism is “fruit of a historical process that was not fully programmed by its pioneers” (p. 9).

Whether they see it as is part of a deliberate plan or the result of a process, many commentators now argue that the neoliberal ‘experiment’ has failed, citing the growth of inequality that appears to be a hallmark of neoliberalism to sustain this claim. They argue that while, in theory, everyone is equal in the market, there are actually many “asymmetries of power or of information” that impede many people’s ability to successfully navigate it (Harvey, 2005, p. 68). Far from the competition of neoliberalism creating an even ‘playing field,’ an individual’s economic and social capital, or lack thereof, play a direct role in their

ability to participate effectively in neoliberal life. Furthermore, the state protection which for decades guaranteed access to essential services such as healthcare, education and welfare has been eroded by policies of deregulation and privatisation (Harvey, 2005, p. 3). The neoliberal state has been described as “hollowed out” by Henry Giroux (2001, p. 3) who notes that it has abdicated its social responsibilities and is instead used to protect the rights of corporations and financial institutions. Finally, the “institutions and rights which the working-class movement succeeded in establishing from the late nineteenth century onwards” have been systematically abrogated under neoliberalism (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 7). The steady curtailment of union power since the 1970s has had an impact on the labour market, in which many of the former protections and guarantees have been lost. Under neoliberalism, flexible and casual work is promoted as advantageous for the worker, but actually benefits the employer, resulting in “lower wages” and “increasing job insecurity” (Harvey, 2005, p. 53).

It has been argued that fact that the market is reliant on law and policy does not mean that the state controls the market, but “precisely the opposite” (Brown, 2005, p. 41). However, Dardot and Laval note that consequence is the “fruit of deliberate policies” (2013, p. 5). That is, the state contributes to the construction of the market and the dissemination of the principle of competition and then finds itself subject to “market norms” (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 302). This means that under neoliberalism the state’s ability to encourage economic growth thus becomes the primary criterion for rating its effectiveness and legitimacy (Brown, 2005, p. 42), corresponding with Foucault’s earlier assessment that under neoliberalism all state policy action is subjected to “a sort of permanent economic tribunal...that claims to assess government action in strictly economic and market terms” (Foucault, 1979/2008, p. 247).

Moreover, as the contradictions and failings of neoliberalism become increasingly well-known and “people discover the trap they’re in,” neoliberalism requires more authoritarianism and more coercion to maintain the status quo (Harvey, 2005, p. 37), thus increasing its own contradictions by denying the individual freedom that is one of its central tenets. This is exemplified in the rise of neoconservatism, which uses the ideologies of nationalism, anti-immigration and family values, among other things, to maintain control of a populace who is becoming aware of the failures of the system (Harvey, 2005).

Increased authoritarianism is not the only spectre raised by neoliberalism; another is the erosion of democratic principles. Wendy Brown argues that neoliberalism is “quietly undoing basic elements of democracy” (2015, p. 17), an idea with which Dardot and Larval agree, stating that neoliberalism is dismantling democracy by “emptying [it] of its substance without formally abolishing it” (2013, p. 6). Living under conditions in which every “dimension of contemporary existence” is subjected to neoliberal principles inevitably has certain effects on the individual and society (Brown, 2005, p. 40). Neoliberalism orders the way individuals act, the way they see themselves and their relationships with others in their society (Dardot & Laval, 2005). This in turn has an impact on democracy, which is not inevitable but must rather be maintained and cultivated (Brown, 2015). Neoliberal imperatives such as competition and individualism fracture the ‘demos’ and thus undermine democracy itself.

The Impact of Neoliberalism on the Capitalist Subject

It is worth taking some time to explore how the neoliberal individual may differ somewhat from the individual of earlier iterations of capitalism, and how their subjectivity is shaped so that they consent to neoliberalism and even see it as a ‘natural’ way of organising

society. However, firstly, it is necessary to delineate exactly what is meant by ‘the subject’ throughout this thesis.

The terms ‘subject’ and ‘subjectivity’ have been debated for centuries, but such a debate is not within the scope of this thesis. Rather, my use of the term *subject* primarily follows what Nick Mansfield, in his book *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway*, refers to as an “anti-subjective theory of the subject” (2000, p. 9). The ‘anti-subjective’ theory does not see a person’s subjectivity as something natural or innate. That is, our subjectivity is “not the free and spontaneous expression of our interior truth” (Mansfield, 2000, p. 10). Rather, following theorists such as Foucault, ‘anti-subjective’ theory of the subject refers to how we are ordered by power, and how we order ourselves (Mansfield, 2000, p. 10). Thus, when used in this thesis, the word ‘subject’ refers to the experience of the self as it has been constructed by social, cultural, economic and political conditions, and, furthermore, to the self that is shaped and dominated by power. For example, the ‘subject’ of capitalism is shaped from the moment they are born, in a certain way, to hold a certain set of beliefs. Additionally, they are ‘subject’ to the authority and mechanisms of capitalism.

I adhere especially to Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in which he describes how the individual is ‘interpellated’ or made a subject of their society and argues that the individual is “*always already*” a subject by virtue of being born into a system of power and practicing the ideological “rituals” of that system (p. 699). He writes that ideology “‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all)” (1970, p. 699). The interpellated subjects of capitalism, thus recruited or transformed, carry its values and adhere to its rationalities, not because they are coerced or threatened but because capitalist ideology is constantly reinforced to them by their own participation in capitalist life.

While Althusser provides a productive analysis of how subjectivity is formed, the specific features of the capitalist subject have been described by other theorists from Max Weber to Erich Fromm to Fredric Jameson. The ideas of these theorists will be discussed in depth in the main chapters of this project; however, it will be useful to provide an overview of some of the broader features of the capitalist subject, focusing particularly on the subject of neoliberal capitalism.

Over one hundred years ago, in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber observed that capitalism encourages the individual to act in certain ways:

The capitalistic economy of the present day is an immense cosmos into which the individual is born, and which presents itself to him, at least as an individual, as an unalterable order of things in which he must live. It forces the individual, so far as he is involved in the system of market relationships, to conform to capitalistic rules of action. (Weber, 1905/1992, p. 18)

He also argued that, under capitalism, all human “virtues” are used in the drive towards the increase of capital – human virtues are viewed as means to an end, rather than ends in themselves (p. 17) – and this increase of capital comprises the primary “duty” of the individual. The idea that capitalism makes a duty of utilising one’s talents for economic ends is likewise an important aspect of contemporary theorisations of neoliberalism, which, as will be seen, argue that the importance of this duty has been magnified under neoliberalism.

The analyses of both Max Horkheimer and Erich Fromm, writing decades after Weber, are reminiscent of Weber’s exploration of the effect capitalism has on the individual. Like Weber, Horkheimer conveys the idea that the human being under capitalism views everything instrumentally, arguing that “less and less is anything done for its own sake” (1947/2013, p. 37). Capitalism tends to render experiences, virtues and ideas meaningless unless they serve an economic end (1947/2013, p. 38) and compels the human being to behave as if they are simply an apparatus for the specific purpose of increasing capital (p.

95). Similarly, in the mid- twentieth century Erich Fromm argued that under capitalism the individual's "body, mind and soul are his capital, and his task in life is to invest it favorably" (Fromm, 1955/2002, p. 138). Since human qualities are commodified under capitalism, the market decides on their value and "if there is no use for the qualities a person offers, he *has* none" (Fromm, 1942/2001, p. 103).

How, then, does the individual living under neoliberal capitalism differ from the individual living under the capitalism of the early or mid-twentieth century? For many theorists, the difference is a matter of magnitude. For example, Dardot and Laval (2013), argue that for the first time "*subjectivity in its entirety*" [italics in original] (p. 275) is formed via capitalistic norms. Their description of neoliberalism as "remaking the soul" (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 22) likewise articulates how all-encompassing neoliberal rationality is for its human subjects. Dardot and Laval clarify that into the twentieth century, subjectivity was pluralistic due to the importance of the nation state and the continued influence of the Church, both of which interfered with "a strictly contractualist concept of social exchange" (2013, p. 259) and ensured that capitalist rationalities "remained contained" (2013, p. 259). However, under neoliberalism there has been a "homogenization" of discourse and values (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 259), whereby other belief systems and ways of being have given way to capitalist "norms of efficiency" (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 259). Furthermore, in contrast to the passive figure of Fromm's Fordist automaton who worked mechanically at its unfulfilling task, the entrepreneurial neoliberal subject is compelled to be an active and willing participant in the web of socio-economic life that has come to encompass their reality. The mass media conveys an "*incitement to enjoy*" [italics in original] (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 287). Under neoliberal capitalism, individuals are meant to pursue market success doggedly and at the same time to enjoy this pursuit.

Furthermore, the individual living under neoliberalism is compelled to compete, not only with others, as in previous iterations of capitalism, but with their past self. They must do constant work on themselves (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 263). According to Dardot and Laval, the subject of neoliberalism “not only seeks to project himself into the future and calculate his gains and losses like the old economic man, but above all seeks to work on himself so as constantly to transform himself, improve himself, and make himself ever more efficient” (p. 265). Similarly, Brown argues that under neoliberalism the “constant and ubiquitous aim” of “human capital” is to “entrepreneurialize its endeavors, appreciate its value, and increase its rating or ranking” (Brown, 2015, p. 36), while Bauman (2000; 2007a) depicts a subject who must constantly work on improving their marketable parts and eliminating those aspects of themselves that are not advantageous.

This is similar to the dynamic described by Horkheimer and Fromm in the mid-twentieth century yet there are slight differences. For a start, in many neoliberal states, the individual has further to fall as state safety nets, unions and collective politics have been dismantled. Secondly, neoliberalism has a significant moralising component that encourages the individual to view the economic success or failure as being a success or failure of the self. As Brown observes, “within neoliberal rationality, human capital is both our “is” and our “ought” (2015, p. 36). Weber’s ‘duty’ to amass capital has been amplified to a moral imperative under neoliberalism. The neoliberal subject is, first and foremost, expected to muster all their personal resources towards the attainment of the nebulous goal of economic ‘success.’ Yet they face an impossible task, for success is “never earned in full, it remains forever conditional, and the condition is the constant supply of ever new proofs of one’s ability to perform, to succeed, to be again and again better than everyone else” (Bauman & Haugaard, 2008, p. 118). Therefore, neoliberal subjectivity consists of not only the constant

striving to outdo the competition but also the anxiety that one has never done enough and the threat of imminent failure.

The successful dissemination of neoliberal ideology and creation of a neoliberal rationality appears to have resulted in a socio-economic landscape in which there is “no vocabulary for political or social transformation” and “no collective vision” (Giroux & Szeman, 2002, p. 95). Neoliberal principles order both the state and the individual, in the process giving legitimacy to ways of thinking and being that conform to these principles, while excluding others that may challenge them. Because neoliberalism interpellates and shapes subjects its subjects, there is little real opposition inside the neoliberal capitalist sphere (Brown, 2005, p. 45). Unfortunately, the desire for an alternative has, as Harvey has argued, driven many people towards conservative religions and even fascist movements in their attempt to outmanoeuvre the “anomie” that is part of neoliberal existence (2005, p. 81). Despite this, social theorists have not accepted neoliberal capitalist rationality as unassailable and, for Marxist theorists, the realm of culture is often seen as a potential means of challenging such rationalities.

The Relationship Between Literature and Society

This thesis is fundamentally concerned with the relationship between contemporary fiction and contemporary capitalist reality and the possibility that cultural texts might be able to enact political work. It thus rests on a foundation of Marxist theory that extends back over a century.

According to classical Marxism, the capitalist base (substructure) consists of the means of production – natural resources, land, tools, factories and so on – and the relations of production, which comprise the class system, commodities and capital itself, among other

things (Marx, 1894/1993). The superstructure represents ideology: art, culture, philosophy, science, religion and politics (Marx, 1894/1993). The capitalist base is generally seen as shaping the superstructure while the superstructure maintains the base. In investigating the relationship between the base and superstructure, or in other words between the means and relations of production and capitalist ideology, Marxist theorists have endeavoured to not only explain how art and cultural production are shaped by and maintain capitalism but how they can be used as political tools to undermine it. Art and culture can be harnessed to affect ideology and in turn shape potentially revolutionary change in the economic base of society. For example, in his *Prison Notebooks*, written between 1928 and 1935, Antonio Gramsci outlines, albeit using different terminology, not only how cultural hegemony rather than physical coercion upholds the capitalist system but how changes in the system can be occasioned by a cultural ‘war of position’ by oppositional political groups (Hoare & Smith, 1999). This cultural ‘war of position’ would comprise, in part, of Leftist art and writing.

Compromising art’s capacity to challenge capitalism, in the first half of the twentieth century the mass production of media and culture intensified considerably. Writing at a time when this mass production was enabling the dissemination of ideas to a wider audience than ever before and at the same time rapidly changing the place of art and culture within society, Walter Benjamin found it *both* problematic for Leftist politics and difficult to out-manoeuvre, *and* potentially revolutionary. In his essay “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin contends that mechanically reproduced mass culture shapes the thinking of its audience and that it is very difficult for the “truly new” to emerge un-criticised in such a cultural landscape (1935/2006, p. 29). Yet at the same time he argues that when it is mechanically reproduced art loses its ‘aura’ or uniqueness and authority. This loss represents a “tremendous shattering of tradition” (p. 21) that itself possesses revolutionary potential. The reproduction of art, and thus the destruction of its “aura”, he reads as evidence of an

increased belief in equality (p. 22), or a belief in the importance of the masses over the few. Like Gramsci, Benjamin finishes his essay by stating the necessity for the Left to politicise art (p. 34).

In “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (1944/2006) Frankfurt School theorists Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer provide a more negative reading of what they term the ‘culture industry,’ exploring the ways in which it maintains capitalist rationalities and arguing that mass culture tightens the net of capitalism around the subject. Adorno and Horkheimer assert that the advent of the mechanical reproduction of art and culture did not reveal a world that the proletariat had hitherto been excluded from, but rather represented a regression in the effectiveness of art’s ability to challenge the status quo. They state: “The culture industry does not sublimate: it suppresses” (1944/2006 p. 54), meaning that the products of the culture industry do not represent the channelling of repressed drives and needs into artistic endeavours but rather these products themselves contribute to the suppression of alternative views. They describe the products of mass culture as “indeed escape, but not, as it claims, escape from bad reality but from the last thought of resisting that reality. The liberation which amusement promises is from thinking as negation” (p. 57). For these theorists, mass culture decreases people’s ability to resist, maintains capitalist rationality, reduces people to “sameness” (p. 58), dissuades critical thought and most importantly narrows the field of possibility; a condition that must be overcome for political change to occur.

In their critique of the ‘culture industry,’ Adorno and Horkheimer discuss film, the radio and magazines, but they do not discuss the novel and they mention theatre only in order to contrast it favourably with film, which “denies its audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in imagination” (1944/2006, p. 45) and as such contributes to the

“withering of imagination and spontaneity” (p. 45). According to Adorno and Horkheimer, theatre engages the imagination because the set and acting cannot fill every world-detail in for the audience. This argument can also be applied to literature; the words of a novel can only do so much work before the reader’s imagination must take over. While Adorno and Horkheimer accuse the ‘culture industry’ of shaping both uniformity and conformity, in Adorno’s other work he discusses how art can contribute to our understanding of the society (see Adorno, 1961/1977). For Adorno in particular, the culture industry obscures and distorts reality while art can unveil and clarify it.

The Marxist theorists of the mid-twentieth century were united in their belief that art could have a profound effect on their world, and that, more specifically, it was vital for political art to challenge capitalism and the capitalist culture industry. Indeed, by the time these figures were discussing this issue in earnest, Marx’s articulation of how the ideological superstructure, including art and culture, could uphold or influence the economic base was already decades old. Underlying the Marxists’ discussions was an idea that people have intuitively held for a very long time: that the relationship between ideology and fictional literature means literature can be used to uphold various institutions, whether religious, social or economic. This can be seen in the moral panic caused by the novels of the eighteenth century, which described young people defying the wishes of their families and acting as individuals. Likewise, Charles Dickens, Marx’s contemporary, used his fiction to draw attention to the social issues of nineteenth century Industrial England. The Marxist theorists of the twentieth century were not only building on Marx’s ideas but on a tradition of thinking that stretched back to the inception of fiction.

Despite their unity on the importance of art, however, the exact kind of art that was required was passionately and thoroughly debated by the Marxist theorists. Frankfurt School

theorists such as Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and their contemporaries György Lukács and Bertolt Brecht, wrote essays that read like open letters to each other (and sometimes were), in a decades-long debate over the exact relationship literary fiction, especially, has with society and what kind of fiction best furthered the aims of socialism. These papers were at times admiring, condescending, mocking and furious. Adorno and Brecht, especially, write strongly and sometimes viciously against Lukács' contentions that realism is the only form of fiction that has revolutionary capacities, and that modernist fiction panders to the anomie of the bourgeoisie (Adorno, 1961/1977; Brecht, 1967/1977, Lukács, 1938/1977).

Like theory, literature is means via which to come to a greater understanding of society. According to Adorno, art is a kind of knowledge, distinct from philosophy or science but knowledge all the same (1961/1977, p. 153). Unlike science and philosophy, however, art, including literature, "is the negative knowledge of the actual world" (1961/1977 p. 160). This means that that, using its content and form, art can reveal or unveil aspects of reality that are not commonly acknowledged or that may even be repressed or unknown (Adorno, 1961/1977, p. 162). Similarly, Herbert Marcuse argues that literature contributes to our knowledge of society not only by merely recording the world exactly as it is, or precisely reflecting it, but by being reality's "other" (1977/1978, p. 54).

Marcuse is one of the greatest proponents of the idea that literary fiction can challenge capitalist rationality. In *One Dimensional Man* he argues that if the reader of fiction or audience of theatre is going to properly contemplate their world, to see it "behind the ideological and material veil," it is "not empathy and feeling, but distance and reflection" that is needed (1964/2002, p. 67). Marcuse developed these ideas further over a decade later in *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1977/1978), stating that fiction can create a "reality which is

suppressed and distorted in the given reality” and reveal “a truth normally denied or even unheard” (pp. 6-7). He skilfully explains how literature can challenge the status quo, writing that human beings in capitalist societies, “unfree” in that they shaped by capitalism to think and act in certain ways, are able to represent what is repressed and suppressed and “only in an estranging form” (pp. 9-10). Things that are excluded from everyday life in capitalism can be presented in literature: “What is normally not spoken is said; what is normally spoken too much remains unsaid if it conceals that which is essential” (p. 45). In literature, “the world is inverted” (p. 54), meaning that the fictional world contains more truth than reality, allowing the falsity and repressiveness of the ‘real’ capitalist world to be unveiled. In this way, literature can contradict the accepted modes and rationalities of capitalist society, and even contribute to social change. This point is vital to this investigation of Palahniuk’s work.

Lukács, too, was a key figure in the argument that literature is a political tool. Indeed, Fredric Jameson writes with some admiration of his “lifelong insistence on the crucial significance of literature and culture in any revolutionary politics” (1977, p. 200). However, Lukács’ ideas on the singular ability of realist literature to challenge capitalism diverge sharply from the ideas of other theorists. In his essay “Realism in the Balance,” written in 1938 from within the Soviet Union, Lukács professes the belief that realism is the only possible kind of revolutionary literature. Central to Lukács’ argument in “Realism in the Balance” is the idea that it is only with realism that society, or “objective reality,” with all its complexities and in totality, can be “reflected” accurately (1938/1977, p. 33). He argues that this accurate reflection is essential for the reader to better understand their society.

For Lukács, the “modern literary schools,” with their focus on the subjective experience of the writer, narrator and characters, simply portray the surface of reality and fail “to discover the underlying essence, i.e. the real factors that relate their experiences to the

hidden social forces that produce them” (1938/1977, pp. 36-37). This approach appears to be problematic to the twenty-first century reader of Lukács, perhaps in part because, through both modernism and postmodernism, they have inherited the subjective approach that Lukács criticises. According to Lukács, only realism can take hold of the “total life context,” not only portraying individual feelings and delving into the very web of relations that makes up reality, but simultaneously conveying their relative importance (1938/1977, p. 36). Amongst the other contentions that Lukács makes are that it is only socialist realism – the realism of the proletariat – that is authentic, and that realism is the only prophetic kind of literature (p. 48). Importantly, Lukács’ position was in line with Stalinist policy at the time and it was potentially very dangerous to challenge realist aesthetics under these conditions. Chuck Palahniuk is not a realist author (and certainly not a socialist realist author) yet this project argues that his novels enact productive political work. Thus, it aligns much more closely with Marcuse’s position than Lukács’ and takes the position that that, for the reader to achieve the distance required for them to properly see their society, “that which is ‘natural’ must assume the features of the extraordinary” (Brecht, quoted in Marcuse, 1964/2002, p. 70).

Another point of difference between Lukács’ argument in “Realism in the Balance” and the position of this project is Lukács’ insistence on the positioning of an astute, authoritative realist author as the source of the objective truth of the world; a truth that is often hidden from others. Lukács writes of socialist realism that “through the mediation of realist literature the soul of the masses is made receptive for an understanding of the great, progressive and democratic epochs of human history” (1938/1977, p. 56). He argues that capitalism, consisting of not only an economic system but also ideology, appears as a totality to the individual subject (p. 31) and explains that the laws and norms of capitalism are “reflected in the consciousness of the men who live in this society, and hence too in the consciousness of poets and thinkers” (p. 32). Thus, he condemns the capitalist

‘Expressionists,’ whose work he contrasts negatively with socialist realism. Yet the problem Lukács correctly identifies – of an ideology being ‘reflected in the consciousness’ of its subjects – is a problem for all authors who have been interpellated into an ideology, not just capitalist ones. This project thus takes the view, contrary to what Lukács suggests in “Realism in the Balance,” that *all* authors are fallible and authorial intention is complex and conflicted. Any author, whether socialist realist, modernist or postmodernist, only has a partial understanding of their society and only writes from their own position, yet they can still make valuable and worthwhile literature.

In contrast to Lukács, Marcuse argues that the subjectiveness of literature is what gives it value, and that the desire to eliminate the subjective from literature represents the diminishment of the importance of “inwardness, emotions, and imagination” (1977/1978, p. 3) and the “devaluation of...individual consciousness and subconscious and their political function” (p. 3). He links this devaluation, coming from the Left, with fascism, arguing that a progressive society will first and foremost be made up of free individuals, rather than being first and foremost a collective. Similarly, Bertolt Brecht, writing against Lukács directly, accuses Lukács of failing to see that the individual subject is “a causal nexus” (1967/1977, p. 69). Marcuse argues that, because society will always be made up of individual humans, “radical change must be rooted in the subjectivity of individuals themselves.” (1977/1978, p. 3). Describing the way in which literature can effect such radical change, Marcuse suggests that it “breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experience” (1977, p. 72) and thus “it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world” (pp. 32-33).

Each side of this debate must be understood in context; Lukács' approach corresponds with the Soviet Union of the 1930s and Marcuse and Brecht were writing in the West several decades later. In the intervening decades the modernist techniques that Lukács criticised so sharply gave way to postmodernism. It has been argued by Fredric Jameson that modernist strategies such as those advocated by Brecht operate differently in different periods, and in the late capitalist, postmodern moment they were less transgressive (1984). The anti-realism versus realism debate may thus seem outdated or redundant. However, this project engages fully with this debate on the grounds that it continues to inform contemporary discussion of the relationship between culture and politics. Furthermore, though it deals with a twenty-first century author, it argues that anti-mimesis is a more effective method of addressing the quandaries of the present moment than realism is. Thus, it argues for the return of what may be thought of as modernist literary methods, such as Brechtian defamiliarisation, in the contemporary neoliberal capitalist context. Such a claim rests on my periodization of Palahniuk's work as arising from a context that is notably different from the late capitalism that came before it.

Throughout this thesis I argue that under neoliberal capitalism there has been an homogenisation of thinking. While postmodernism – the 'cultural logic of late capitalism' – represented a shattering of tradition and narratives, a "radical break" from the period that preceded it (Jameson, 1984, p. 53), the culture of twenty-first century neoliberalism represents a consolidation – a concentration of the idea that the market is the only thing that should order human action. It is not a complete break from postmodernism but rather an amplification of it, under which, as has been seen, human action and thought is standardised to a heightened degree. This cultural logic of neoliberalism has been dubbed "capitalist realism" by Mark Fisher (2009); a context in which the entire field of action and thought is

both produced and limited by capitalist rationality. This is the context that contemporary fiction operates within and what must be challenged.

Jameson himself was aware that such a homogenisation was occurring. In his 1994 work, “The antimonies of postmodernity,” Jameson notes that

[T]he paradox from which we must set forth... is the equivalence between an unparalleled rate of change on all the levels of social life and an unparalleled standardization of everything - feelings along with consumer goods, language along with built space - that would seem incompatible with such mutability... What then dawns is the realization that no society has ever been as standardized as this one, and that the stream of human, social and historical temporality has never flowed quite so homogenously.

However, the ‘antimony’ described by Jameson has accelerated in the twenty-first century. Capitalist realism now operates as “a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action” (Fisher, 2009, p. 16), normalising capitalist rationality to the extent that it is “so taken for granted that it is no longer worthy of comment” (Fisher, 2009, p. 8).

Under such conditions, the realistic portrayal of circumstances is unlikely to pose any significant challenge. While realism has historically been used to reveal elements of society to a readership for which they were unfamiliar, notably by authors such as Charles Dickens, it is not a useful literary device for addressing the specific task of challenging the contemporary context of capitalist realism. Rather, as Fisher argues, “A moral critique of capitalism, emphasizing the ways in which it leads to suffering, only reinforces capitalist realism. Poverty, famine and war can be presented as an inevitable part of reality, while the hope that these forms of suffering could be eliminated easily painted as naive utopianism” (2009, p. 16). Under capitalist ‘realism,’ the logic of neoliberalism – including its inequalities – are not only common knowledge but common sense. In order to undermine neoliberalism, its appearance of inevitability must first be shattered. Throughout this thesis I argue that such a

disruption requires a return to modernist techniques, which, rather than reinforcing neoliberalism by portraying it accurately, have the potential to oppose it by making it appear obscene or ridiculous. Indeed, Fisher himself argued for the need to utilise the ideas of “radical theorists” such as Brecht, who argued that “emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a ‘natural order’” (2009, p. 17).

Another reason anti-mimesis provides the most effective challenge to neoliberalism is that as capitalism has advanced, the shape of the literary readership has changed too. Contemporary literature has little choice but to appeal directly to the individual subject as under neoliberal capitalism the collective has all but disappeared. The proletariat as observed by Marx and imagined by Lukács no longer exists. As Marcuse wrote in 1977, the proletariat has been completely “integrated” into capitalism (1977/1978, p. 30). Because of this, the role of literature in reaching individuals and connecting with their experience is more important than ever, yet it also provides a challenge for anyone wanting to portray capitalism ‘realistically.’ The standardisation that has occurred under neoliberalism is a standardisation of subjectivity. Individuals who have been shaped by neoliberalism nevertheless live their lives in diverse ways. The job, then, of contemporary fiction is to appeal to the subjective experiences of neoliberal individuals. Palahniuk’s body of work is an excellent example of how fiction can appeal to a wide readership, who approach his novels in diverse ways, but who are united by their belief that things are not right within contemporary society. As Marcuse argues: “If art “is” for any collective consciousness at all, it is that of individuals united in their awareness of the universal need for liberation – regardless of their class position” (p. 31).

Fiction has a relationship to reality and to politics, even though it is not a direct relationship; fiction must appeal to the consciousness of individual people in order to

challenge ways of being that are often unquestioned. The question must be asked: how can we simultaneously acknowledge the vital role that literature plays in society while at the same time understanding that authors are not all-knowing and, whatever form they use, however excellent their work, are still human beings with imperfect understandings of their own realities? Or, to put it differently: how can we reconcile the idea that Chuck Palahniuk's fiction does important work in revealing and challenging taken-for-granted neoliberal capitalist ways of being with the fact that Palahniuk is himself a subject of neoliberalism, who only has a partial view of his own society?

In the twenty-first century, part of the important work of literature is to reveal facets of contemporary capitalism, and especially contemporary capitalist subjectivity; to bring them out of the dark to be named. By depicting the confusion, instability and disconnectedness of life under capitalism – something that authors living under capitalism can draw on their own experience to do – writers can connect with their readers, who may be able to recognise the truth of their own experience in the writing. Readers may begin to piece together a greater understanding of their own experience and a more critical understanding of their world. This depiction of what it feels like to live under capitalism does not require a detailed, objective, exact reflection of twenty-first century neoliberal capitalism – readers see that picture every day. Rather, it requires the author to draw on their own feelings and experiences to 'invert' the world and ultimately tell the truth about the underside of capitalist life, the unpleasantness that is inextricable from the progress. Inverting the world in the case of Palahniuk's work means creating worlds in which the real and unreal mix freely, creating outrageous, pathological characters, and repeatedly using exaggeration and satire to make capitalist norms seem abnormal. However, although this project focuses on anti-mimesis as a powerful way of exposing the mechanisms of reality, it is not my intention to suggest that realism should be rejected altogether. As Fredric Jameson argues in defence of Lukács,

realism may contribute to the mapping of reality and in particular “structural relations between classes” (1977, p. 212-213). There is still a place for realist literature.

Literature is more than just a reflection of what already exists. It is “the terrain in which new attitudes, norms, conventions, and desires (and, of course, forms of subjectivity) are produced, contested, disseminated, and buried” (Nilges, 2008, p. 29). Writing emerges from human society, and thus from fallible authors, but it has the potential to shape attitudes and beliefs. This is why it has drawn so much interest from Marxist theorists, who hope to find the means of challenging capitalism. Though literature is a different kind of knowledge, separate from that of science or philosophy, it can sit alongside science and philosophy, complementing these disciplines, when it comes to trying to understand the world. Thus, one of the key arguments in this thesis is that Palahniuk’s fiction does similar work to the theorists I am reading it against.

Like the Marxists, by his own admission Palahniuk is interested in fiction as a way of contesting contemporary ways of being. That he is an author working under the very conditions he is trying to describe and contradict, that his work is not wholly objective or realistic, are strengths, not weaknesses. Brecht, again writing against the rigidity of Lukács’ ideas about what constitutes great literature, wrote beautifully that:

There are experiments which come to nothing and experiments which bear late fruits or paltry fruits. One sees artists who sink under the burden of their materials – conscientious people who see the magnitude of the task, do not shirk it, but are inadequate for it. (Brecht, 1967/1977, p. 74)

The magnitude of the task of challenging contemporary capitalism is large indeed. It is too great a task for a person to accomplish on their own, and it is too much for one person to do definitively or perfectly. Rather, challenging contemporary capitalism is an ongoing project

taken on by many people, philosophers, theorists, artists and authors, from multiple angles, inconsistently and less than flawlessly. Chuck Palahniuk's novels are part of this project.

The Past is Dead, the Future is Unimaginable: Breaking through capitalist realism with fiction

In her 1995 article, “The City as Dreamworld and Catastrophe,” Susan Buck-Morss describes the societies of the great Western and Eastern blocs of the twentieth century as being enchanted by dreamworlds, having fallen under waking dream-spells. The promise of industry to build a new world, and in doing so obliterate “material scarcity” (p. 3), dominated the dream worlds of both capitalism and socialism. However, as with all dreams, beyond these dreamworlds lay an obscured but still extant reality. In the West, the reality was that of exhausted imagination and “psychic shock” (p. 8). In the East, it was not only “state coercion” (p. 19) but suffering and death (p. 3). This was the other side of the dreamworld: catastrophe.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* in order to explore capitalist and socialist ‘dreamworlds,’ Buck-Morss cites Benjamin’s assessment that the nineteenth century Paris Arcades represented the dream world of commodity capitalism, holding out the “promise of happiness for the urban masses” (1995, p. 5) and concealing the undersides of capitalism; the loneliness and isolation of the city and the inequality of access to the very commodities that promised happiness in the first place. With the passing of nineteenth century commodity capitalism after World War One, Benjamin read the now-ruined Paris Arcades as “having lost their dream-power over the collective” and taken on a new power to reveal “this dream *as* a dream” (Buck-Morss, 1995, p. 6). That is, the ruins of the arcades embodied the contingent nature and transience of nineteenth century capitalism, making these discernible to the twentieth century observer. Buck-Morss takes up and develops Benjamin’s idea, investigating how the twentieth century industrial architecture of both the United States and the Soviet Union are relics of other passed dreamworlds. Now that the world has awakened from these dreams, we can likewise see them for what they were.

The concept of the ‘dreamworld’ not only utilises the metaphor that the dreaming society is ‘asleep,’ under the spell of a system of ideas, but affirms the utopian core of the dreamworlds of previous centuries. What the arcades of the nineteenth century and the skyscrapers and monuments of the twentieth had in common was that they represented the future (Buck-Morss, 1995, p. 16); a future that would surely be better for more people than the past. Reality may never have caught up with the utopian vision, but the utopian vision existed still.

If the commodity-capitalist dreamers were woken up by the destruction of the first World War, and the dreamworlds of the twentieth century were crumbling by the end of the 1970s, by which time it had become obvious that the material abundance created by industry would not be distributed equitably, what dreams are we dreaming now, in the twenty-first century? Is the metaphor of the dream even applicable anymore? Almost twenty-five years ago Buck-Morss asserted: “in this cynical time...adults know better than to believe in social utopias of any kind” (1995, p. 26). This cynicism has only heightened over the last two decades: the subjects of contemporary neoliberal capitalism may be sleeping but they do not dream, and especially not of a better or collective future; neoliberalism is resoundingly not utopian and the impact of neoliberal capitalism is not only psychic and social catastrophe, but environmental catastrophe.

Indeed, twenty-first century capitalism is better described as precisely the opposite of a dream world: a form of brutal ‘realism.’ In his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism: Is there any alternative?* Mark Fisher describes capitalist realism: a situation wherein capitalism is constantly reaffirmed as the “only viable political and economic system” (p. 2). Fisher asserts that in the twenty-first century “capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable” (2009, p. 8). It increasingly appears that it also occupies the horizons of the dreamable.

The presence of the word ‘realism’ in the phrase ‘capitalist realism’ has inevitably prompted discussions of how aesthetic realism can be used to challenge this politico-social realism. At least one commentator has concluded that any aesthetic ‘capitalist realism’ inadvertently bolsters capitalism; realism is “art that reproduces and reinforces its context” (Clune, 2013, p. 195). What is needed is rather an ‘anti-mimetic’- an aesthetics that does not pretend to describe capitalist society in all its elements and reveal things as they actually are, but rather upends capitalist realism, revealing its contingency and alienating the reader from what is otherwise taken for granted. Clune argues that “perhaps by examining imaginary capitalism we will discover something we didn’t already know” (2013, p. 200). The anti-mimetic can contribute to the imagining of alternatives (Clune, 2013, p. 195), and perhaps even to the rekindling of the utopian urge.

Chuck Palahniuk’s novels embody the kind of fiction that is needed under capitalist realism: that which defamiliarises the familiar capitalist context instead of reinforcing it. A clearly fantastical capitalism is portrayed across Palahniuk’s novels. In many of them, any sense of linear time and history has been lost and aesthetics from cultures and times past are, to use a phrase of Fredric Jameson’s, ‘cannibalised’ for use in new houses, theatres and replica colonial towns. The societies of the novels are saturated with media noise and the products of mass culture take hold of the characters’ thoughts. Yet Palahniuk does not use realist techniques to depict these systems. Rather, he exaggerates their proportions, making them appear outlandish and peculiar. Relatedly, his narrators often experience their societies to be closed systems; inevitable and unchallengeable, and Palahniuk’s strange settings – such as an old theatre with fake windows and doors through which the characters cannot escape – serve as apt metaphors for this.

By portraying such a system across at least half a dozen of his novels, Palahniuk attempts to prompt something similar to what both Benjamin and Buck-Morss called the

“moment of disenchantment – of recognising the dream *as* dream” (1995, p. 23). Though, in the case of the neoliberal reader, it is not a matter of leading them to realise that they are dreaming but leading them to recognise that what they see as being *real* is constructed. In other words, the neoliberal reader does not need to be awoken from a dream that is obscuring reality; there is no utopian urge concealing the undersides of neoliberalism. The neoliberal subject does not believe in a better future. Rather, the ‘moment of disenchantment’ for the neoliberal reader occurs when they are shown that neoliberal capitalism is not inevitable but contingent on human systems and actions, and can thus be challenged. The fantastical settings of Palahniuk’s novels work to dispel capitalist realism.

Speech in a Dead Language

Styles of the past, and of different cultures, often repeat in the architecture and interiors described in Palahniuk’s novels, just as they are often utilised in contemporary buildings and design. The many examples of this include the “Santa Barbara hacienda” with a “big scarred mission-style trestle table in the dining room” in *Invisible Monsters* (1999a, p. 230), as well as the “English Tudor,” the “New England saltbox” the “Queen Anne” (p. 3), the “Dutch Colonial” (p. 4), the “French Normandy” (p. 4) and the “Georgian-style” (p. 28) houses in *Lullaby* (2002). While on the surface these may seem like peripheral details that Palahniuk has simply used to augment the descriptions of his settings, the strong emphasis, across Palahniuk’s novels, on repetition and replication suggests that such details are an important part of the author’s exploration of his society. In particular, when read alongside the ideas of Mark Fisher and Fredric Jameson the references to the styles of past cultures and epochs in Palahniuk’s fictional worlds can work to uncover some of the mechanisms of capitalist realism.

In his articulation of capitalist realism, Mark Fisher asserts that capitalism has come to dominate the “social imagination” (2009, p. 28) so thoroughly that “it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it” (p. 2). This situation is at least in part the result of the collapse of temporal and cultural reference points; the vanishing of these reference points contributes to the pervasive belief that capitalism is the only viable option. The less awareness people have of other alternatives, the more capitalism dominates their imagination in the way that Fisher describes. Fisher’s theorisation of this narrowing of context under capitalist realism has much in common with Fredric Jameson’s articulation of the postmodern, except that under Fisher’s capitalist realism the conditions that Jameson described in 1984 have intensified and become virtually all-encompassing. Fisher acknowledges his debt to Jameson but argues that when Jameson was writing, there were still political alternatives to ‘late capitalism,’ while in the twenty-first century capitalism is now “far more pervasive” (p. 7). Others have dubbed capitalist realism a “strong variant of postmodernism,” one which marks the transformation of ‘late capitalism’ into neoliberalism (Dienst, 2013, p. 248).

Accordingly, the “weakening of historicity” (Jameson, 1984, p. 58) that Jameson observed in the late capitalism of the 1980s has deepened in the twenty-first century. As commentators such as Wendy Brown (2005) and David Harvey (2005) have observed, the project of neoliberalism was constructed very deliberately in the early 1980s. Its principles of individualism and market freedom were disseminated via a methodical campaign, by politicians such as Margaret Thatcher (Brown, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Dardot & Laval, 2013). By 2019, then, successive generations have been born under this neoliberal project. For these generations, there has never been an ‘outside’ to neoliberalism; neoliberalism is all they have ever known. The sense of timelessness produced by these circumstances contributes to capitalist realism in the sense that it is the only real option. Susan Buck-Morss describes the

effacement of people's understanding of history under capitalism beautifully in her article: "The transitoriness of fashion washes like the waters of Lethe over the collective which, losing all sense of tradition, forgets its own history" (1995, p. 5). This forgetting of history is vital for neoliberal capitalism.

The sense of timelessness experienced under the capitalist realism of neoliberalism is reinforced by capitalism's ability to draw all historical cultural and artistic endeavours into the realm of the market, "assign[ing] all cultural objects, whether they are religious iconography, pornography or Das Kapital, a monetary value" (Fisher, 2009, p. 4). This largely empties these objects of their 'otherness' and therefore of any ideological challenge that they could mount against capitalism. Real cultures, with their own belief systems, art and knowledge, become no more than hollowed-out styles under capitalism, and if one has no understanding of history, one likely lacks the understanding that the present socio-economic order is contingent on many factors.

Fisher notes that once cultural objects are drawn into the capitalist sphere, they are subsequently "reinstalled on an *ad hoc* basis" (2009, p. 6), used merely for aesthetic purposes, as decoration and fashion. In a similar process, the art, literature and other cultural creations of the past are transformed into "museum pieces" (Fisher, 2009, p. 4), objects to be looked at but not engaged with; dead objects that have been emptied of any power they once had. Once this has happened, they can be re-employed as tropes or motifs. Here, Fisher is clearly building on Jameson's ideas, set forward in "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in which he refers to capitalism's "random cannibalization" (1984, p. 65) of the artwork, styles and ideas of the past. Without the past providing a reference point, and with other cultures reduced to aesthetics, the logic of capitalism is presented as both inevitable and a closed system; the right way to be, all there ever has been and therefore all there ever will be.

The worlds of Palahniuk's novels certainly lack a clear feeling of temporality, being as they are filled with houses that have 'cannibalised' styles of the past, reducing them to aesthetics. Perhaps the best example of this phenomenon occurs in *Haunted*, which is set in a theatre. The many antechambers of the theatre are decorated in the styles of previous times and cultures. These rooms include "the French Louis XV lobby, the chairs and sofas all cornflower-blue velvet, the walls crowded and busy with plaster curls and scrolls painted gold" (2005, p. 41); "the red-lacquered, Chinese-restaurant-styled promenade with all its carved plastic Buddhas"; "the Mayan-temple-styled foyer in the basement with its leering carved warrior faces" (2005, pp. 58-59) and the Arabian Nights gallery, with "plaster pillars carved to look like elephants standing on their back legs, rearing up to support the ceiling with their front feet" (2005, p. 102).

The rooms of the theatre demonstrate Jameson's assertion that, under late capitalism, pastiche has taken the place of style. According to Jameson, pastiche is devoid of intentionality; it is empty imitation (Jameson, 1984). Jameson explains that, under late capitalism, "the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of the new global culture" (1984, p. 65). While style is related to creativity and originality, and arises out of a specific time, pastiche lacks any originality of its own; the architecture of the theatre in *Haunted*, being made up of a haphazard jumble of styles appropriated from other cultures, clearly falls into the latter category. The rooms of the theatre are pastiche of past cultures. The prevalence of pastiche undermines the legitimacy of the different logic, different norms and different ways of being that have existed in different times and places, contributing to the pervading feeling that capitalism is a closed system (Fisher, 2009). Fisher, building on Jameson's idea of pastiche, explains that "in the conversion of practices and rituals into merely aesthetic objects, the beliefs of previous cultures are...transformed into

artifacts” (2009, p. 4). The close juxtaposition of the different styles within the theatre, illustrated by Palahniuk’s rapid listing of the different rooms and the focus on what they look like, also reinforces that the aesthetics of the various cultures have been utilised with no consideration other than that of ornament. The eclectic fashion in which these simplistic visual representations of forgotten cultures have been thrown together in the theatre replaces their actual geographical, temporal and cultural differences – both with each other and with contemporary capitalism – with an apparent equivalence.

Each of the cultures used in the design of the theatre has been reduced to a crude aesthetic and repurposed as interior decoration, a visual point of interest for the people who pass through the rooms of the theatre building. One aspect of the descriptions of the ornamental rooms in particular can stand as a metaphor for the way that capitalism appropriates aspects of the ‘other,’ whether other times or other cultures, repurposes them and re-presents them as part of itself. That is, the use of a unifying colour for each of the rooms. Each of the cultures in the old theatre is differentiated from the others by their colour; blue for the era of Louis XV, black for Egyptian, green for Italian Renaissance, orange for Mayan, red for Imperial China and so on. On the surface this makes each culture unique and distinguishes it from the others, yet it actually serves to further reinforce that the only real difference between them is one of colour and style, not of culture, religion or other beliefs, philosophy, politics, economics, or any of the myriad other differences between them.

Immediately following this list of cultures that have been ‘cannibalised’ to decorate the theatre, the narrator of *Haunted* comments that each room has a “different deep color, but with the same gold accents” (2005, p. 175). These gold accents function to draw together the different colours and styles of the various rooms into a cohesive whole. One reading of the gold accents is that they are a metaphor for the way that capitalism draws everything into the

market, which binds everything together in a fundamental same-ness; that of being valued in monetary terms. Such a situation reinforces capitalist realism and makes it very difficult to successfully contest neoliberal capitalism.

The use of the styles of earlier cultures in the architecture of the theatre does not represent an engagement with these cultures. Rather, it reinforces their position as the exotic – dead – ‘other.’ Jameson describes pastiche as “speech in a dead language” (1984, p. 65). Speech in a dead language: words that have lost their meaning to the living. Pastiche merely utilises an aesthetic, emptying it of whatever meaningful creative and cultural impulses first produced it and thereby rendering it, and its culture, voice-less. Indeed, in Jameson’s account pastiche can reduce an entire culture, all its systems and its unique ways of being, to nothing more than a simplified aesthetic used for the ultimate end of making money. The fact of the existence of real, other, systems of being is obscured by the appropriation of their aesthetics, because by reducing them to empty ornament this appropriation suggests that the culture has never been anything more than its style.

Fisher argues that the main difference between pastiche as he describes it and Jameson’s postmodern pastiche is again a matter of extent. While in 1984 the vestiges of modernism still provided some contrast to postmodernism, “we are now so accustomed to retrospection and pastiche that we no longer notice them” (Fisher & Dean, 2013, p. 30). If this is true, then fiction could be one vehicle by which to encourage the recognition of pastiche. Indeed, Palahniuk makes the pastiche in his novels so exaggerated, the use of the cultural aesthetic so obviously disengaged from the reality of the culture, that it upends this taken-for-granted practise and exposes what is concealed under normal circumstances: that capitalist subjects encounter other cultures as aesthetics devoid of cultural substance, which contributes to their inability to imagine alternatives to the status quo.

A copy of a copy of a copy

As has previously been discussed, history is one context by which, through its contrast with their own time, the capitalist subject can glimpse the fact that capitalism is only one system of many. While pastiche draws on cultural tropes and aesthetics, thereby reducing complex cultures to ornamentation and subsequently disconnecting the aesthetic from the culture altogether, simulacra generate a false, often nonsensical and, ultimately, compliant history.

The simulacrum, the image with no relationship to reality at all (Baudrillard, 1981/1994, p. 6), which “threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false’” (p. 3), occurs often in Palahniuk’s novels. Indeed, there are a number of pointed references to the simulacrum; in some phrases, Palahniuk directly evokes Baudrillard. One example of this is the famous phrase describing the narrator’s life as “a copy of a copy of a copy” in *Fight Club* (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 21), which suggests the narrator’s deep cynicism of the possibility of authenticity in his world. The exact same phrase is repeated by Shannon in *Invisible Monsters* (Palahniuk, 1999a, p. 14), and in *Survivor*, published the same year as *Invisible Monsters*, the phrase is changed slightly to “a reference to a reference to a reference” (Palahniuk, 1999b, p. 110). These quotations suggest that in the worlds these narrators occupy, everything is derivative, and nothing is genuine or unique. The phrases themselves even enact the act of derivation across the three books.

One could attempt to trace the copies or references, the simulacra, back to their original – back to the reality from which they were produced – but they would never succeed, because simulacra in the form of images, films and fiction reproduce a history that never existed. Rather, like the way in which the pastiche of other cultures weakens the potential for those cultures to serve as an ‘outside’ to capitalism, the production of historical simulacra

weakens the capitalist subject's understanding of history as a valid challenge to the logic of capitalism. As Jameson argued, the proliferation of simulacra means that the "past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether..." (Jameson, 1984, p. 66). Simulacra undermines our understanding of the past and its strength is eroded as it becomes a series of images that are used as entertainment within the capitalist system, rather than something that existed outside capitalism.

Many of the representations of the different cultures in the old theatre of *Haunted* are simulacra in that they bear no resemblance to any reality that ever existed. For example, the narrator of *Haunted* describes the Mayan foyer: "the walls covered with plaster, pitted to look like lava rock. The fake lava rock is carved to look like warriors wearing loincloths and feather head-dresses. The warriors wearing capes of spotted fur to look like leopards" (2005, p. 134). This description may seem nonsensical; plaster that looks like lava that looks like warriors that look like leopards. Aesthetically, this sounds like one of the late-capitalist "overstimulating ensembles" (1984, p. 66) to which Jameson refers, which serve to do nothing but discombobulate their viewer. With such descriptions, Palahniuk's fiction indicates just how far from reality our images of the past have come. An understanding of the past can help us orientate ourselves in the present but if our only access to the past is via assorted tropes and simplistic pictographs, then we cannot hope to do this.

According to the narrator of *Haunted*, the Mayan foyer is "telling the story it wants you to accept as the truth" (2005, p. 134). Earlier in the novel, they had explained that "a theatre is built to exclude the outside reality...The walls are double layers of concrete with sawdust packed between them" (2005, p. 119). In his construction of such a disorientating and yet entirely closed setting, Palahniuk demonstrates his awareness that one of capitalism's strengths is that it appears to be a total system. The theatre can stand as a metaphor for

capitalism under the influence of capitalist realism. Like the theatre, capitalist realism ‘excludes outside reality;’ it excludes counter-narratives and denies any actually existing historical and cultural differences that would be able to challenge its totalising logic. In doing so, it tells a ‘story it wants you to accept as truth;’ the story that there is only one way of being in the world. It is through the use of metaphors like these, rather than exact description of things as they are, that capitalist realism can be challenged, because these metaphors can communicate an idea that initially seems outrageous: twenty-first century neoliberal capitalism, with all its choice and apparent opportunity, in fact wields tight control over its subjects, shaping their thoughts and ideas through capitalist realism.

One of the most fascinating examples of the simulacrum in Palahniuk’s work is Colonial Dunsboro in *Choke* (2001). Colonial Dunsboro is a replica of an early-colonial American village, complete with a colonial governor, town council, indentured servants and a set of stocks. Throughout the novel, Palahniuk consistently makes fun of the way that Colonial Dunsboro is meant to show the reality of life in North America during colonial times, undermining its depiction of an historical reality and reinforcing that it is a simulacrum. He also emphasises that Colonial Dunsboro is a tourist attraction – a product to be sold – revealing that under contemporary capitalism historical simulacra are marketable commodities.

Victor Mancini, narrator of *Choke*, works at Colonial Dunsboro, where he must dress ‘authentically’ in “britches and waistcoat...powdered wig and buckle shoes” (2001, p. 23). Victor is meant to be “the backbone of colonial America,” an “indentured Irish servant” (p. 23). Yet he does not take his job seriously and continually reminds the reader that Colonial Dunsboro is fake, a tourist attraction with no relationship to historical reality at all. The Lord High Governor of the town is in actuality an overbearing and exacting manager, whose main

occupation is not the governance of a colony but bullying the workers into maintaining the illusion of Dunsboro. The many forbidden behaviours, such as whistling Beatles songs, having tattoos or nose rings, and chewing gum (2001, p. 30), clearly point to the need to maintain the deception that Colonial Dunsboro is an accurate representation of the past.

In Colonial Dunsboro, the stocks are used as a punishment in an obvious attempt to replicate the way of life in a 'real' colonial village. Yet the Lord High Governor's use of the stocks for a large number of absurd minor infractions ensures that their utilisation lends a farcical quality to the village. The stocks are largely used on employees who step out of character and break the illusion of Colonial Dunsboro: "The Lord High Governor bends Denny over at least twice a week, for chewing tobacco, for wearing cologne, shaving his head. Nobody in the 1730s had a goatee, His Governess will lecture Denny" (2001, p. 29). The presence of the stocks to punish those who reveal, however briefly, that Colonial Dunsboro's falsity serves to highlight even further that the village is a simulacrum.

Despite the Lord High Governor's best efforts, the fact that Colonial Dunsboro has no actual connection to an historical place that *was* Colonial Dunsboro keeps breaking through. Indeed, it appears that the employees themselves are determined to undermine the appearance of reality: "The blacksmith keeps beating his metal, two fast and then three slow beats, again and again, that you know is the bass line to an old Radiohead song he likes" (p. 28). No matter how hard the Governor tries, he will never be able to completely eliminate the evidence that Colonial Dunsboro is a simulacrum; an idea underscored by Victor's declaration that the "worst problem with living history museums" is that they "always leave the best parts out. Like typhus. And opium. And scarlet letters. Shunning. Witch-burning" (p. 29). Colonial Dunsboro portrays an uncomplicated and idealised version of history that has little to do with the real thing.

In describing all the many infractions that would get an employee of Colonial Dunsboro into trouble, Victor's narration not only highlights the village's fraudulence but creates a clear link between Colonial Dunsboro and most other capitalist companies. The Lord High Governor's control of the workers is representative of the methods with which capitalist organisations control both the behaviour and the physical bodies of their employees. Victor regularly highlights that he and the other residents of Colonial Dunsboro are low-waged workers who suffer through bad working conditions and are underpaid. At one point, he discusses his role acting as an indentured servant and notes wryly that "for six dollars an hour, it's incredibly realistic" (p. 30). This highlights that Colonial Dunsboro, far from being an historical village, is a business that, like many other businesses, puts profit ahead of paying its workers good wages. In consistently reinforcing the connection between the village and its commercial purpose, Palahniuk reinforces that this particular simulacrum is nothing but a product, and like any product it has an entire workforce behind it to ensure that it sells.

Also belying Colonial Dunsboro's blatant commercialism are the many references to tourists, who watch the workers as if they were watching actors on a stage. For example, while Denny is in the stocks "his wig falls off and lands in the mud and horse poop and about two hundred Japanese tourists giggle and crowd forward to get his shaved head on videotape" (p. 25). Denny's "cravat, soaked in snot and crap, flaps in his face" (p. 23) and Victor complains that "the Japanese all giggle as if this is a gag we'd rehearsed" (p. 23). Later, he objects that while they are working, "People are snapping pictures, trying to take some part of you home as a souvenir" (p. 121). When Denny is finally 'banished' for one too many infringements against the work-place rules, a "crowd of tourists watched from behind their video cameras. They're eating popcorn out of boxes... They're sucking cotton candy off their fingers" (p. 192). By having the tourists eating popcorn and cotton candy, Palahniuk makes

his point clear: that our links to the past have come undone and now we resurrect the past, as simulacra, to sell them as entertainment.

Colonial Dunsboro is just a theme-park, designed to make money. It is qualitatively similar to the fictional ‘period’ movies that are produced by Hollywood; films that, as discussed in depth by Jameson (1984), provide the viewing public with countless historical simulacra, all the while slowly obscuring our view of history. Colonial Dunsboro has nothing to do with Colonial America. Rather, as argued by Alex Blazer in his discussion of *Choke*, it is part of a “nostalgic desire to resurrect and preserve in image a world that never existed; it symbolizes the mastery of the virtual over the real...” (Blazer, 2009, p. 147). Its presence in Palahniuk’s fiction corresponds to a feeling that dominates under neoliberalism, that it is “a simulated world, a living history museum, with no exit to the real” (Blazer, 2009, p. 147). This feeling is the result of capitalist realism, the construction of which was made possible, in part, by the prevalence of simulacra in the mass media.

The photographs and video recordings the tourists take of Colonial Dunsboro add yet another layer to the many levels of representation that Victor must navigate; it is no surprise that, in a different context, Victor states: “how my life starts to feel is like I’m acting in a soap opera being watched by people on a soap opera being watched by people on a soap opera being watched by real people, somewhere” (Palahniuk, 2001, p. 69). Here, Palahniuk returns to the ‘copy of a copy of a copy’ motif that runs through his early novels. In *Choke*, Victor is unable to locate his life in an authentic present, in part because the proliferation of simulacra means he is not able to orientate himself in linear time. His disorientation is an advantage to the system he inhabits, because he has no stable platform from which to challenge it, and no understanding of historical context from which to formulate alternative ideas.

Thus, the past repeats itself in the landscapes of Palahniuk's novels, via pastiche and the simulacrum, but these repetitions of the past have little to do with history. Similarly, the fact that images of history proliferate in the present does not mean that the present has a strong sense of historicity. As Jameson explains:

When I talked about the loss of history, I didn't mean the disappearance of images of history...The increasing number of films about the past are no longer historical; they are images, simulacra, and pastiches of the past. They are effectively a way of satisfying a chemical craving for historicity, using a product that substitutes for and blocks it. (Stephanson & Jameson, 1989, p. 18)

From this perspective, the increase of historical pastiche and simulacra points to the very lack of historicity in the present. Neither brings us any closer to history; the first empties history of all its power, reducing all previous times and cultures to aesthetic phenomena; the second erodes the line between fact and fiction. These distorted repetitions of the past undermine our connection to the past; we base our understanding of history on shadows, or a mirage. As Jameson argued, this slowly 'effaces' the "past as referent," weakening our ability to refer to the past as a way to understand ourselves in the present.

Unable to locate ourselves in the scheme of things, we become ensnared in a world of capitalist realism. To use one of Palahniuk's characters as an exemplification, we could be Miss America, who, trying to escape the theatre, pulled "aside the green velvet drapes in the Italian Renaissance lounge to find windows bricked over" and then "broke a stained-glass window in the Gothic smoking room, only to find a cement wall wired with bulbs to fake daylight behind it" (2005, p. 41). Or, to use a metaphor used by Victor of *Choke*, we could be "trapped... all of us, we're stuck in the same time capsule, the same as those television shows where the same people are marooned on the same desert island for thirty seasons and never age or escape..." (Palahniuk, 2001, p. 33). Without history, it appears there is no outside to capitalism, and no viable counter-narratives.

A Singing, Dancing Big Brother

Capitalist realism is not only supported by a decrease in historicity. It also has an impact on how individuals experience the present, creating the sense of an everlasting present without a clear future, the latter which, even if not completely elided, is viewed with cynicism. As Fisher (2009) has noted, “the extirpation of the long term extends backwards as well as forwards” (p. 59). On the other hand, people’s sense of the present has narrowed into a series of increasingly fast-paced moments in time, moments that have been compared to both the increasingly short camera shots used in film and television (Stephanson & Jameson, 1989) and the “digital micro-slices” of the internet age (Fisher, 2009 p. 25). The effect of this ‘speeding up’ of the present is that it has become “natural to shift from one thing to another” (Stephanson & Jameson, 1989, p. 5), never spending long on any task, in a present that is lived at an increasingly frantic pace that leaves little space for contemplation. These conditions obviously bolster neoliberal capitalism, with its focus on short-term gain at the expense of long-term considerations, its casual work and its precarity.

As with the decrease of historicity, experiencing the present as a number of short, separate moments in time intensifies capitalist realism by preventing the capitalist subject from contextualising their situation or from making long-term goals that may conflict with the relatively short-term imperatives of material prosperity; or even from directly confronting the real environmental catastrophe that the earth is faced with. In Palahniuk’s work, this sense of the constant present manifests powerfully and frequently through characters’ encounters with the media.

Of all Palahniuk’s novels, the exploration of media bombardment is most explicit in *Lullaby* and *Survivor*, in which the media appears as a relentless presence that dominates human thought, primarily by distracting and discombobulating them rather than by

disseminating ideology. The characters that populate *Lullaby* are media addicts, following Fisher's depiction of the subjects of capitalist realism (2009, p. 25). Carl Streator, *Lullaby*'s narrator, is an exception. He wants to escape the media noise that surrounds him but finds that he cannot evade the unremitting commotion put out by other people's devices. This "siege of noise" (Palahniuk, 2002, p. 16) reduces Streator's ability to think clearly. It inundates him, even when he is at home: "Even in the bathroom, even taking a shower, you can hear talk radio over the hiss of the showerhead" (p. 59). He is surrounded by a cacophony of noise:

The muffled thunder of dialogue comes through the walls...The stomp and stomp and stomp of a drum comes down through the ceiling...Up through the floor, someone's barking the words to a song. These people who need their television or stereo or radio playing all the time. These people so scared of silence. These are my neighbours. These sound-oholics. These quiet-ophobics. (p. 15)

That the characters of *Lullaby* are literally addicted to the media is reinforced many times by Palahniuk throughout the novel with the repetition of the last two sentences of the above quotation, "these sound-oholics. These quiet-ophobics." For example, it is repeated three pages later as "These distraction-oholics. These focus-ophobics" (p. 18). Another iteration is "These talk-oholics. These listen-ophobics" (p. 132). These repetitions form what Palahniuk calls "choruses" (Palahniuk, 2004, p. 143). Palahniuk uses these choruses to reinforce the central ideas that he wants to convey to his reader. In this case, the point of the chorus seems to be to draw attention to the idea that the media is not a benign presence in society but, on the contrary, is a force that dominates through distraction. In providing a constant stream of information and entertainment, it keeps people planted in the present, with no time to ponder the future. This corresponds with Fisher's explanation, in his discussion of capitalist realism, of how dividing people's present up into short episodes causes a rupture in their ability to imagine linear time and thus affects their ability to imagine the future (Fisher, 2009).

Palahniuk reinforces the connection between distraction and control by employing 'Big Brother' as a motif throughout *Lullaby*. Big Brother, of course, is the term Orwell used to describe the ever-present, ever-watching totalitarian surveillance state in his novel, *1984*. Yet Palahniuk's 'Big Brother' is not Orwellian, not an oppressive, omniscient and omnipresent state, but a much subtler mechanism of control that in some ways is more effective, a point Palahniuk makes clear:

Big Brother isn't watching. He's singing and dancing. He's pulling rabbits out of a hat. Big Brother's busy holding your attention every moment you're awake. He's making sure you're always distracted. He's making sure you're fully absorbed. He's making sure your imagination withers. Until it's as useful as your appendix. He's making sure your attention is always filled.
(pp. 18-19).

As often occurs in Palahniuk's novels, the narrator and indeed the plot drops away in this passage and the same urgent voice speaks out to the reader, usually using the pronoun 'you.' In using this technique, Palahniuk not only blurs the line between himself and his narrator but also blurs the line between the novel and the reality of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. He makes it clear that, while his novels are fiction, the issues they encompass are not. In *Lullaby*, this occurs whenever Streator discusses Big Brother: "The music and laughter eat away at your thoughts. The noise blots them out. All the sound distracts" (p. 19); "Here's Big Brother, singing and dancing, force-feeding you so your mind never gets hungry enough to think" (p. 75); "Anymore, no one's mind is their own. You can't concentrate. You can't think. There's always some noise worming in" (p. 19). While Palahniuk's language is hyperbolic, the image he portrays, of unfocused, befuddled, media-addicted characters, dovetails with an anecdote Mark Fisher relays, of a student who wore his headphones to class even though there was no music playing through them. The conclusion that Fisher makes is that, for this student, as for many others, "it was a reassurance that the matrix was *still there*" (p. 24). Palahniuk's use of the second person pronoun in the above passage puts the reader in

the position of considering how they are enmeshed in the technological ‘matrix’ that captures their attention almost constantly and which they, like Fisher’s student, may have become reliant upon without realising it.

The media in *Survivor*, like that in *Lullaby*, is dedicated to entertainment rather than obvious indoctrination yet it, too, still takes key role in shaping ways of being. As in *Lullaby*, it does this through its position as an all-encompassing, ever-present entity that permeates all lived experience and supports capitalist ways of being through its content and practices. While it is pervasive, it is also so well established as to not be almost unnoticeable; the talk-shows, the infomercials and that apex of entertainment, the commodity-spectacle of the Super Bowl, which saturate the cultural landscape of the novel, are simply accepted as normal parts of existence by most of the characters in the novel. Most importantly, however, the logic of capital is built into the media system of the novel and it is this which helps shape the attitudes of those who populate *Survivor*. Thus, to provide some examples, the talk shows in the novel must make money, so they ‘race to the bottom’ with wilder and wilder stories; the actual stories themselves do not matter, they just need to be lurid enough to gain a large audience. Tender’s prayer books need to sell, so he writes prayers that are more and more ridiculous, such as the “Prayer to Silence Barking Dogs” (1999b, p. 124) or “The Prayer to Locate a Lost Contact Lens” (1999b, p. 123). The Super Bowl must outdo its own viewer numbers every year, so Tender begins performing miracles; the final miracle being, preposterously, that of revealing the game’s score live, before it had even started. It is this instrumentality, this need to always exceed previous profit margins, rather than the content of the media entertainment, that shapes the attitudes of those that it touches and renders them synchronized with both each other and the system itself. The instrumental, cynical media system legitimates capitalism and reinforces the appearance that it is inevitable.

Further illustrating that in the social landscape of *Survivor* the actual content of the media is largely arbitrary – it does not matter what it is, as long as it can sell – is Tender, who despite being a religious celebrity, does not believe in God, and who cynically espouses a religion that is completely devoid of any real religious doctrine. When he preaches, which he usually does on television, Tender simply says what his writers, employed by his management and agent, want him to say. Thus, taking the place of religious philosophy in Tender's sermons are "vague inspiring messages" such as "calm down. Everyone, breathe deep. Life is good. Be just and be kind. Be the love" (1999b, p. 138). Tender does not even practise these words before he recites them. Rather, the first time he sees them is usually in the "last thirty seconds" before a show begins (1999b, p. 138). To further underscore the fact that what Tender is espousing has little to do with religion and much more to do with the demands of the capitalist market, is the fact that Tender has a whole team of people working on both the other aspects of the 'show' that is Tender's religious service, and other spinoffs and products that can also be sold:

The music team was busy writing hymns...The writing team was putting my autobiography to bed, The media team was doing press releases, merchandise licensing agreements, the skating shows: The Creedish Death Tragedy on Ice, the satellite hook-ups...The writing team has control of every word that comes out of my mouth. (1999b, pp. 135-134)

This passage makes it clear that there is little meaning behind Tender's sermons; the words he communicates are themselves facile and almost completely empty of real significance, and they are also supported by no rationale apart from, of course, capitalist imperatives. In *Survivor*, religion does not use the media to disseminate messages and tighten its control. Even religious figures only operate within the demands of the market, effectively neutralising their message and reinforcing that the only outlook of any legitimacy is capitalist. This is how the media in the novel shapes the characters; by filtering every idea through the different stages of commodity-production and marketing. The result is diluted content that is meant to

appeal to the largest number of people.³ In the twenty-first century, the market system is so effective that even alternative, independent and anti-capitalist works have been pulled into the realm of the market (Fisher, 2009). As Fisher notes, in capitalism, even anti-capitalism sells well. Even anti-capitalist and alternative ideas are part of the addicting media-entertainment ‘matrix,’ strengthening the impression that all that exists is an eternal capitalist present. This is why capitalist realism often seems so impenetrable and resistance so futile.

At other times, the depictions of the media in both *Lullaby* and *Survivor* rely on older, though still important, interpretations of the media as a vehicle for disseminating ideology, as when Streater urges the reader to “imagine an idea occupying your mind the way an army occupies a city” (2002, p. 157) or asks: “do we have free will, or do the mass media and our culture control us, our desires and actions, from the moment we’re born?” (2002, p. 228). Similarly, Fertility Hollis complains that “it’s like we all have the same artificial memory implants” (1999b, p. 110). She goes on to predict that that “soon, we’ll all have the same thoughts at the same time. We’ll be in perfect unison. Synchronized. United. Equal. Exact. The way ants are. Insectile. Sheep” (1999b, p. 110).

While Fisher’s assertion that the media plays a significant role in the “pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes” (Fisher, 2009, p. 9) can go some way to explaining why the characters of *Lullaby* and *Survivor* feel like they are ‘occupied’ or have ‘artificial memory implants,’ Louis Althusser’s theory of interpellation, outlined in

³ Indeed, Palahniuk’s fiction operates within this system. The author has discussed the need for authors to self-censor in order to reach the largest audience possible, noting that, finding a publisher aside, if an author wants to get into Oprah Winfrey’s ‘Book Club’ or to even get their book into a good position in Barnes and Nobel, they must ensure their book’s content is appropriate. He explains that if an author wants their book “face out” at Barnes and Nobel, they cannot “have the word fuck on the first page because this does not “fit their corporate culture” (Rogan, 2018).

“Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1970), can further elucidate this circumstance. Althusser describes interpellation as the process by which the individual accepts the identities offered to them by an ideology, such as capitalism, resulting in their immediate constitution as an ideological subject. In order to explain this, Althusser asks his reader to imagine an individual being “hailed” by a police officer on the street and turning around to see who addressed them (p. 699). Althusser argues that by the simple act of turning, the individual “becomes a subject” because “he has recognized that the hail was really addressed to him, and that it was really him who was hailed” (p. 699). This is what capitalism does to the individual, but while Althusser’s illustration of interpellation breaks it into a series of events – being hailed and turning – in reality all parts of this process occur simultaneously and cannot be separated into different steps (p. 700).

According to Althusser, interpellation is inescapable; individuals living under an ideology are “always already subjects,” even before birth (1970, p. 699). This is because the system that will give them the identity, which they will accept, already exists and has already established the ideological rituals that will govern their birth, education and entire life (p. 700). This can help account for the feeling, described by both Streater and Fertility, of being unable to think outside very specific, sanctioned options. The interpellated individual experiences capitalism and capitalist ways of being as natural or obvious. As Althusser explains,

It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are “obviousnesses”) obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot fail to recognize and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out... “That’s obvious! That’s right! That’s true!” (p. 698).

The interpellated subjects of capitalism must find ways to think and speak outside of capitalism (Althusser, 1970) yet they inhabit a social landscape that is hostile to this very

task, dominated as it is by a mass media that both distracts them and consistently reinforces capitalist ways of being.

Despite its ostensible hyperbole, the portrayal of the media in both *Lullaby* and *Survivor* corresponds surprisingly closely to the operation of the media under capitalist realism. It distracts the capitalist subject, eroding their ability to imagine any future let alone a transformative one, and at the same time the very processes by which it operates reinforce the appearance that capitalism is inevitable. Capitalism incorporates and even pre-corporates (Fisher, 2009) both different narratives, in the form of religious and political alternatives, and subversive works, which must adhere to market imperatives if they are to be seen or heard by even a moderately sized audience. Because of this, and because capitalist realism appears to be “infinitely plastic, capable of reconfiguring itself at any moment” (Fisher, p. 54), capitalism presents itself as both incontestable and inescapable. After all, it is ostensibly futile to attack a system that can incorporate even the attack into its own logic. If one considers, too, the underlying factor that the interpellated subject of capitalism is preconditioned to accept capitalist ways of being as natural or obvious, challenging capitalist realism appears to be the most daunting of tasks.

Falling in Love with the Capitalist ‘Snake Nest’

Pygmy (2005) is the novel that most powerfully depicts the power of capitalist realism, through its contrast of capitalist realism and a more overtly coercive form of domination. The novel focuses on Pygmy, who has grown up in a totalitarian socialist regime. He has absorbed the lessons of this regime so well that he is chosen to go on a mission to America; his arrival in America, and thus his ‘birth’ into a capitalist system, marks the beginning of the novel.

Pygmy's description of the American context in which he finds himself, illustrate how well he has learnt the lessons of his home country. For Pygmy, the United States is a "snake nest," a "den of Evil" and a "hive of corruption" (p. 2), while the people that he encounters are "American Christian vipers" (p. 29). It is clear that, wherever Pygmy is from, he has been subjected to a large amount of explicit propaganda. He is an avid reciter of quotations, and the figures whose quotations he chooses to recite give the reader some insight into Pygmy's education, which seems to have focused on topics like the military, socialism and the importance of a strong state. For example, he quotes "turncoat Hebrew, corrupt genius Robert Oppenheimer, atom bomb father, quote, 'I am become as death, the destroyer of worlds'" (p. 7), "glorious tyrant Mao Tse-tung, total to admire, quote, 'Women hold up half the sky'" (p. 29), "politic father Karl Marx, quote, 'History repeats itself, first as tragedy second as farce'" (p. 19) and "quote villain emperor, accomplished huckster Adolf Hitler, quote 'Great liars are also great magicians'" (p. 53). What can be discerned from these quotations is that Pygmy's education in his country was based on a very explicit ideology, which students were expected to repeat until they had absorbed it completely; there are also many flashbacks of Pygmy engaged in such lessons throughout the novel. Yet the fact that Pygmy and his comrades must be indoctrinated actually points to the brittleness of the system, which needs to be propped up by such explicit engineering. In contrast, such explicit indoctrination is not necessary under capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009).

As the regular flashbacks to Pygmy's formative years indicate, the constant threat of violence attends the ideological education in Pygmy's home country, further indicating that this total regime is fragile rather than strong, and that it has not fully penetrated the subjectivity of its populace. Menace looms over these flashbacks of Pygmy's past. For example, in one, the students in Pygmy's class are all forced to vote on whether or not to kill a white rat. Yet there is no real choice; the teacher themselves votes to kill the rat, and the

lesson being taught is that it is wrong to show mercy. Pygmy feels sympathy for the animal and wants it to survive. He prays silently for the rat to be allowed to live: “Say inside head, say: *Permit rodent survive, Say, Please*” (p. 43). Yet, in order to avoid danger himself, he votes with the others. This scene, and the contrast between Pygmy’s real wishes and his actions, indicate that the ideology of the state has only superficially shaped Pygmy’s subjectivity.

In another flashback, Pygmy describes a military parade: “Depicted here vast apparatus for national defense, stretch length central boulevard, filled one curb to opposite, ranked solid many battle tanks thunder rolling steel threads” (p. 91). He and the other special operatives march with the infantry, all with a “standard stride 22.5 inch. Matched speed battle tank, artillery rockets” (p. 92). Crowds of people cheer this display of military power, “All faces flash cheering teeth. All hand brandish whipping flag” (p. 92). The violence implied in such a scene is actualised when one of the operatives’ parents try to rescue them from the parade; evidently, despite the display of unity, there is still dissent in Pygmy’s country, and this dissent must be quelled. The squad leader responds to this disruption of the parade by forcing the operative to shoot his own parents, because “Lunatic individual threat as cancer, contagion to the state, spread dangerous illness so destroy all. Must excise” (p. 96). The operative complies and the result is “dangerous words eliminated” (p. 97). Later, Pygmy sees his own parents in the crowd and makes another silent prayer: “*Please...Say, Must no attempt rescue*” (p. 98). Again, the reader can see that, while outwardly Pygmy’s absorption of the state ideology seems total, aspects of his interior life remain untouched. If this is true for Pygmy, the implication is that it is true for many individuals in the cheering crowd.

While Pygmy enters an ostensibly freer country when he arrives in America he also submits to what is portrayed in the novel as, in many ways, a more total control. Something that resembles capitalist realism very closely shapes Pygmy, dominating him and re-creating

him as a subject of capitalism from the moment he enters the country. At the beginning of *Pygmy*, his American host father promises Pygmy: “We’ll make an American out of you...” (p. 7), and this prediction is validated by the denouement of the novel, in which Pygmy does, indeed, elect to become a traitor to his home country in order to stay in the United States. However, in some ways it would be more accurate to say that America makes a capitalist out of Pygmy, not by forcing him to repeat capitalist slogans or by show of force, and not even by educating him about capitalism, but by immersing him in the entire capitalist-realist context, which re-shapes his thoughts and desires in the image of capitalism.

One of the first things Pygmy notes is that, in his new socio-cultural context, he begins to forget a lot of the important knowledge he acquired in his home country, including his aptitude to speak Mandarin and Portuguese, his understanding of advanced calculus and his ability to operate weapons (p. 48). Pygmy, rightly, recognises that the culture of American capitalism is slowly erasing everything he knows, and replacing it with a new set of knowledge. Throughout the novel, he blames the Junior Swing Choir, in which he and the other agents must participate, for this state of affairs, decrying the “idiot lyric word of songs” and “worthless language of corrupt Western poetry” (p. 46), which fill his head so that there seems to be no room for anything else. He complains: “idiot song occupy head of operative me...idiot song drive all useful knowledge from head” and accuses the Junior Swing Choir of being a “conspiracy oppress American youths, create them future slave workforce, singing million idiot song during labour of frying meat burgers” (pp. 147-148). Although he is wrong that the Junior Swing Choir is a conspiracy to create a ‘slave workforce,’ Pygmy is correct in his recognition, however hyperbolic it may seem, that the barrage of popular culture that he is subject to helps to maintain the capitalist system. Indeed, his articulation of the culture is not so different from Streater’s in *Lullaby* or Fertility’s in *Survivor*. The central difference between Pygmy and the other two narrators is that the latter are ‘insider’ narrators, whose use

of ‘we’ includes the reader and allows them to see certain aspects their own society in the outrageous landscapes of Palahniuk’s novels, while Pygmy is an ‘outsider’ narrator. Pygmy’s ostensibly ridiculous commentary is deliberately humorous, initially creating distance between his narration and the reader and later inviting a moment of realisation that, in many ways, his observations are surprisingly redolent of contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

When Pygmy realises he is beginning to forget the knowledge that formed the basis of his education in his home country, he attempts to retain it in various ways, such as, by internally reciting the elements of the periodic table. Pygmy recites: “...*gallium, germanium, gold...*” (p. 131); “*Hafnium...helium...holmium*” and “*iridium, iron, iodine...*” (p. 133). “*Strontium...plutonium...uranium...*” (p. 172), “*Erbrium...europium...fermium...*” (p. 201). Since Pygmy’s education consisted largely of repeating quotations and knowledge that the state wanted him to repeat, and which aided its military-industrial ideology, it makes sense for Pygmy to recite this knowledge in order to retain the link between himself and the state ideology he has always believed in. There are many more examples of Pygmy’s recitations in the second half of the novel, however, as the novel nears its end, American words – often the names of products or brands – start inserting themselves, against Pygmy’s will, into his recitations: “*Aluminum, antimony, angora...*” (p. 218); “*Zinc, zirconium, Zoloft...*” (p. 218); “*Nickel, niobium, Naugahyde*” (p. 223). The last word of each of these examples is obviously not an element from the periodic table but a commodity; angora being an expensive wool, Zoloft an antidepressant, and Naugahyde an artificial leather. The latter two are also trademarks used in the United States. Later, Pygmy recites: “*Fermium, fluorine, Formica...*” (p. 224); “*Manganese, Mouseketeer, Modesto...*” (p. 227); “*Xenon, Ex-Lax, Xanax...*” (p. 228); “*Neon, nylon, Nashville...*” (p. 228), and finally “*Lithium, Librium, latex...*” (p. 233). These American words, corporate trademarks such as Ex-Lax, Xanax and Formica, invade Pygmy’s thoughts, just as media noise invades Streator’s in *Lullaby*, in both cases the

invasion consisting ultimately of not only words but ideas, an entire system of socio-economic relations and a material world.⁴

Using the character of Pygmy, Palahniuk shows how susceptible even the most apparently unyielding individual is to the contemporary capitalist landscape. *Pygmy* ends with Pygmy being adopted by his host family, and himself adopting American ways of being. He, too, now shouts inane phrases such as “Go, Team Cedar!” (p. 240) and declares: “Begins here new life of operative me” (p. 241). The coercive ideology that Pygmy was brought up within is no match for the immersive capitalist context. Yet Pygmy’s transformation, from the rigid subject of a totalitarian regime to the consuming subject of American capitalism, does not mark a happy ending; Palahniuk does not suggest that Pygmy has been saved. Rather, the suggestion is that Pygmy’s transformation was an inevitability. Under capitalist realism, it is extremely difficult to combat the belief that contemporary capitalism is the only viable option. It is significant that the end of this novel portrays Pygmy having capitulated to the forces he categorically attempts to resist. Streater and Fertility, too, remain immersed in the system that they are so disenchanted with. This may indicate that the most common response to finding oneself in capitalist realism is “a feeling of resignation: there’s no point struggling, we just have to adapt” (Fisher & Dean, 2013, p. 27). As *Pygmy* demonstrates, in

⁴ The presence of the word ‘Mouseketeers’ in Pygmy’s thoughts is particularly apposite to a discussion of how capitalist realism carries specific neoliberal capitalist ways of being. The ‘mouseketeers’ were the children who featured on the Disney show *The Mickey Mouse Club*, pseudo-educational children’s show that has been watched by generations of American children, and which carries with it a capitalist world view of sales-expansion and aspiration. The intrusion of ‘mouseketeers’ into Pygmy’s thoughts alludes to the insidiousness of a system that begins working on the individual from the moment they are born, throughout childhood and into adulthood, dominating them not through physical force or Orwellian surveillance but through a socio-cultural landscape that promotes capitalist ways of being to virtually the absolute exclusion of all others.

Palahniuk's world an attitude of simultaneous disavowal and resignation can be found within even the most ardent of anti-capitalists.

Challenging Capitalist Realism

The novels appear to be ambivalent about the possibility that the circumstances described above – immersion in a seemingly immovable system – can be effectively challenged. *Pygmy*, especially, with its portrayal the insidiousness of the ability of capitalist culture to shape ways of being against the subject's will, seems to suggest that resistance is a very difficult, unlikely, almost impossible task. In other novels, it appears that, at best, the characters occupying these fictional capitalist landscapes can find respite by escaping into places that are easier to comprehend and somehow more real than the instrumental, impermeable worlds that they are not yet fully inured to. In *Choke*, Victor and his best friend Denny dream of living on an overgrown block of land that is described as a place apart from the rest of the city:

The houses end, and the eight hundred block is just land with more houses on the block after that. The land is just tall grass planted around the edges with old apple trees, their bark all wrinkled and twisting up into the darkness. Inside a bunch of brush, blackberry whips, and scrub, more thorns on every twig, the middle of the land is clear...The wind lifts and crushes the tall grass. Nobody but plants lives here now... (2001, p. 167)

Nature, not simulacra or media-noise, is given pre-eminence in this passage. In this small corner of the world, it is not people or the constructed capitalist world that reigns, but nature, a fact reinforced by Palahniuk's personification of nature in the phrase "nobody but plants lives here now." There is the distinct suggestion, too, that places like this represent a vaster reality, far more authentic than capitalist realism itself and truly timeless.

A similar idea also appears in *Lullaby*. In this novel, Streater dreams of travelling beyond the edge of the world to escape capitalist realism; one of his often-used refrains is “think of deep outer space. The incredible cold and quiet” (2002, p. 198). Streater knows that, somewhere, there is an ‘outside,’ but the pull of his society is so strong that he feels like he would have to go as far as space to find such a place. Significantly, the most intimate moment in the novel, in which he reveals his love for his girlfriend Helen, occurs when they are on a Ferris Wheel, the incessant, intruding noise having faded below them. It is only here, apart from the world, that Streater can think clearly. Equally, Tender of *Survivor* is only able to see his life clearly – and tell his story – when he is “in the cockpit of a jetliner,” alone, with “the sky...blue and righteous in every direction and the “sun...total and burning and just right there” (1999b, p. 1). In all these novels, when the characters can escape their social environments, which are filled with pastiche, simulacra and media noise, the effect those environments have on them begins to recede – or, to paraphrase Benjamin and Buck Morss, they begin to wake from their enchantment.

How, then, can the subject of capitalism, enmeshed as they are in capitalist realism, be awoken from their enchantment? One vehicle for creating such an awakening is anti-mimetic fiction, such as Palahniuk’s. In re-presenting commonplace aspects of capitalist society to the reader in estranging and exaggerated ways, such fiction can remind the reader again and again that these commonplaces are not simply obvious or natural but, viewed from another perspective, strange and even wrong. These repeated reminders can ensure that the reader’s new knowledge of the strangeness of their society is not assimilated into their everyday life and forgotten. This is supported by Fisher, who echoes Frankfurt School theorists such as Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse when he states that the first thing any “emancipatory politics” must do is to “destroy the appearance of a ‘natural order’” and “reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what

was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable” (2009, p. 17). Anti-mimesis can be part of such a politics.

Conclusion

Palahniuk’s fiction depicts socio-cultural landscapes in which the past has been lost as a referent; instead, it endlessly repeats as pastiche and simulacra, emptied of all that made it meaningful. This, along with the rapid and unrelenting media bites that pervade the settings of the novels, ensures that the characters occupy an eternal present in which it is virtually impossible for them to formulate any coherent challenge to the status quo. Furthermore, the system within which they exist seems capable of bringing all opposing narratives into its embrace, easily overwhelming any resistance by compelling it to adhere to the logic of the market.

The descriptions of both the landscapes of Palahniuk’s novels and the quandaries the characters find themselves in correspond well to the situation created by Fisher’s capitalist realism, revealing its mechanisms and thereby contributing to a moment similar to Buck Morss’s “moment of disenchantment – of recognising the dream *as* dream” (1995, p. 23). I say similar, because the moment of disenchantment as described by Buck Morss – of seeing “the gap between the utopian promise...and the dystopian actuality” (1995, p. 23) – has already occurred for many of the subjects of capitalist realism; they know the system is terribly flawed and they do not anymore dream utopian dreams. They know that neoliberal capitalism has failed, but they are cynical of the prospect of any change and capitalism appears too much of a totality to move. Rather, the ‘moment of disenchantment’ required by the capitalist subject is the moment that they realise capitalism is a constructed system and not inevitable. That it is moveable.

The cynical subjects of twenty-first century capitalism are not dreaming; they do not need to be woken up. Rather, they are labouring under the illusion that what is constructed – capitalism – is both real and obvious. Fully interpellated into their society, they must complete the work of breaking through capitalist realism themselves. Reading anti-mimetic portrayals of capitalism may be the first step in such a process. Considering capitalist realism's domination of both 'obviousness' and the collective worldview, portraying capitalism just as it appears in life, even those aspects of it that many people would agree are unfair or dangerous, could fail to break through the barrier of 'common-sense' that protects many damaging capitalist practices. Rather, what is required is fiction that makes these conditions seem remarkable and worth discussing.

The Features of the Extraordinary: Disconnection and loneliness in Chuck Palahniuk's novels

If you haven't already noticed, all my books are about a lonely person looking for some way to connect with other people... In a way, that is the opposite of the American Dream: to get so rich you can rise above the rabble, all those people on the freeway or, worse, *the bus*. No, the dream is a big house, off alone somewhere...Some lovely isolated nest...An environment you can control... We get there, and we're alone. And we're lonely. (Palahniuk, 2004, p. xv).

Chuck Palahniuk's novels almost exclusively contain characters who are emotionally isolated and struggling to connect with others. These characters occupy fictional socio-cultural landscapes where they are set in opposition to each other in a competition with no clear end, where it is commonplace for them to view each other as commodities and dispose of relationships as if disposing of material objects, and where even their most intimate, sexual relationships are ordered by instrumental rationality; fictional landscapes that parallel contemporary capitalist society, with its celebration of individualism and competition and its instrumentalisation of human beings, relationships and sex.

In this chapter, I employ Marxist and neo-Marxist theory to explain the impact of capitalism on people and their personal and sexual relationships. Specifically, I draw on the ideas of Erich Fromm who posited that while people in many Western capitalist societies have attained freedom from overtly oppressive social structures, capitalist rationality ensures that they do not have the freedom to be truly creative, spontaneous and individual, which effects their ability to connect with others (1942/2001). I will also discuss how theories of neoliberalism describe its impact on the human subject and explore the ways in which the specific neoliberal capitalist context is slightly different from the context of 'monopoly capitalism' that Fromm described in the mid-twentieth century. Using these theories, I draw parallels between Palahniuk's characters and the neoliberal capitalist subject. Finally,

following Herbert Marcuse's idea that fiction plays a vital role in 'naming the unnameable,' I conclude that Palahniuk's hyperbolic and outrageous characters effectively represent the position that the neoliberal subject, as described by theorists such as Bauman (2000), Brown (2005) and Dardot and Laval (2013), finds themselves in. Furthermore, Palahniuk's characters parallel a contemporary subject who, following Fromm's thought, exists free from overtly oppressive social control yet lacks 'positive freedom' because they are controlled by a specific neoliberal rationality.

My argument in this chapter departs from the line of argument that that has been set forward by commentators such as Kavadlo (2005), Jordan (2002) and de Rocha (2005), which sees the focus on community in Palahniuk's fiction as directing the reader toward an answer to the problems incumbent in life under contemporary capitalism, this answer being increased connection and love. As will be discussed, important features of contemporary capitalist rationality act as impediments to this very action. Instead, I will argue that Palahniuk's fiction portrays, perhaps inadvertently, some of the tensions that exist for the neoliberal subject. One of these tensions is that despite being desirous of community, community is antithetical to the neoliberal subject, who can be described as competitive, individualistic and accustomed to seeing both others and relationships as means to ends.

Radical Individualisation

Contemporary neoliberal capitalism has been described as a time of "radical individualisation" (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 277) but it would be a mistake to think that this individualisation is something entirely new. Rather, it has long been a key feature of Leftist theory that the capitalist system alienates humans from each other. In the mid-nineteenth century Marx drew a connection between alienation from the product of one's labour and

alienation from other humans: “An immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labor...is the estrangement of man from man. When man confronts himself, he confronts the other man. What applies to a man’s relation to his work, to the product of his labor and to himself, also holds of a man’s relation to the other man...” (Marx, 1932, p. 32). Variations of this thesis continued to feature prominently in Leftist thought throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

Following the ideas of Frankfurt School theorist Erich Fromm, the ‘radical individualisation’ occurring in contemporary neoliberal societies is the latest iteration of a process that has been taking place since the end of feudalism and beginnings of what we can recognise as a nascent capitalism (1942/2001). In *The Fear of Freedom* Fromm relates this process of individualisation to the various struggles for increased freedom that have been fought in Western society. Fromm argues that although freedom is generally desirable, its attainment often has difficult and complex repercussions. For example, the decline of the feudal system that kept people firmly in their place in the hierarchy of human interactions had a double-sided effect. Firstly, negotiating the system of burgeoning capitalism allowed humans to become “more independent, self-reliant, and critical” (1942/2001, p. 90). For Fromm, the independence and self-reliance encouraged by the capitalist market are positive; in fact, they are the prerequisites for the fulfilment of human potential. Yet the underside of the dismantling of feudalism is that people became “more isolated, alone, and afraid” (p. 90). No longer were people cast in familiar and understood roles within an order that was more significant than they were. Instead, capitalism “put the individual entirely on his own feet. What he did, how he did it, whether he succeeded or whether he failed, was entirely his own affair” (p. 93). According to Fromm, this change from an overtly oppressive and unjust, yet orderly, system, to one in which they were expected to create their own destiny, left the individual anxious and uncertain.

In developing his thesis Fromm makes a distinction between what he refers to as “negative freedom” or “freedom from” and “positive freedom” or “freedom to.” ‘Freedom from’ denotes freedom from religious and secular authorities that tightly control the lives of people, such as the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages or the feudal masters (p. 93). On the other hand, “freedom to” or “positive freedom,” is described as the freedom to be spontaneous, original, authentically emotional, to make genuine connections with others and to have individuality as opposed to just individualisation (pp. 225-226). Very generally, Fromm argues that while ‘freedom from’ has become increasingly the norm in Western societies, ‘freedom to’ is a rarer phenomenon. Yet it is important for humans to attain both freedom from and freedom to, as having freedom from old regimes and authorities without having freedom to fully develop as a unique and creative person leads to the situation that can be observed currently, under contemporary neoliberal capitalism; freedom with isolation, individualisation without individuality. To have ‘freedom to,’ Fromm believes humans first need to recognise their situation and then think critically about it, before acting.

According to Fromm, the isolation that ‘freedom from’ creates when it isn’t accompanied by ‘freedom to’ causes such discomfort that people try to escape from it (1942/2001, p. 141). One way they do this is to submit to new, even harsher forms of authority or forge what Fromm calls ‘secondary bonds’ (p. 122). In this way, they try to assuage their anxiety by becoming part of a whole that is greater than themselves (p. 134). In *The Fear of Freedom* he uses the examples of the Protestant Church under the Reformation and rise of German fascism as systems that people turned to in the past to assuage the anxieties that arose from increasing ‘freedom from.’ While Fromm was writing 1942, it should be considered that contemporary capitalism encourages instability and precarity even further; many commentators have explored the upsurge in people subscribing to right-wing ideologies in Europe and America (Neiwert, 2019; Revelli, 2019; Stanley, 2018; Traverso,

2019), and Fromm's ideas can go at least some way to explaining the appeal of such ideologies to the insecure subject of neoliberal capitalism.

Another obstacle to 'freedom to' identified by Fromm is that despite ostensibly achieving freedom from oppressive governments and religions, people internalise certain ways of thinking and being that are manufactured by capitalism. In fact, Fromm argues that this occurs as part of the desire to escape the anxiety engendered by capitalism. Adopting capitalist rationality, "the individual ceases to be himself. He adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns...The discrepancy between "I" and the world disappears, and with it the conscious fear of aloneness and powerlessness" (1942/2001, p. 159). Prior to the time of Fromm's writing, the characteristics of capitalist rationality had already been developed by sociologists such as Max Weber⁵, who described capitalist rationality as an 'iron cage' because of the way it reproduced itself as fact or common sense, thereby caging capitalist subjects in a virtually unassailable system of belief. Fromm extends this idea by arguing that the adoption of capitalist rationality is a kind of defence mechanism. He describes capitalist rationality using the metaphor of 'the automaton,' who participates mechanically in economic life and who views other people and even themselves instrumentally and with indifference (1942/2001, pp. 101-102). Fromm explains that capitalism orders society according to the laws of the market; the employer employs an employee and uses them instrumentally, like a machine, to achieve economic ends. The employee in turn uses the employer and their relationship becomes "one in which both are means to an end, both are instrumental to each other" (p. 102). A similar relationship occurs between business owners and their customers, in which customers are manipulated into

⁵ Fromm studied sociology under Max Weber's less well-known brother, Alfred, at the University of Heidelberg.

buying goods (p. 102) and soon the instrumentality of relationships initially observable in the commercial sphere spreads to personal relationships, and human relationships come to resemble “relations between things” (p. 102). In a rejection of Kant’s ethical imperative to treat people as ends-in-themselves rather than means to ends, capitalism fully sanctions the act of treating people as means to ends.

Earlier I stated that the individualism seen in contemporary neoliberalism can be seen as the ‘latest iteration’ of the process of individualization. Thus, it is important to examine how the contemporary situation is different from the dynamic that Fromm described in the middle of the twentieth century, as well as outlining how some of the aspects of capitalist rationality that Fromm delineated have intensified in the last thirty years of neoliberal capitalism.

Under neoliberalism the process of ‘individualisation’ has taken on a new pervasiveness in the form of specific political and economic policies that encourage individualist thinking and discourage collectivity and solidarity (Brown, 2005; Dardot & Laval, 2013, Giroux, 2001). The first half of the twentieth century saw an upsurge in strong labour unions and the creation of state welfare systems and state services in many countries, including New Zealand, Australia, Canada and England (and the related New Deal in the United States); at the time Fromm was writing, capitalism and the social state still appeared to be compatible. Since the beginning of the 1980s, however, neoliberal political policies have been used to reinforce individualism in these same countries, as well as in the United States and elsewhere. Tracing the history of this change in the United Kingdom, historian Derek Fraser writes:

It [social welfare] germinated in the social thought of late Victorian liberalism, reached its infancy in the collectivism of the pre-and post-Great War statism, matured in the universalism

of the 1940s and flowered in full bloom in the consensus and affluence of the 1950s and 1960s.

By the 1970s it was in decline... (Fraser, 1984, p. 233)

Fraser goes on to say that the policies followed by the governments of both the United States and the United Kingdom in the 1980s (at the time he was writing) were “inimical to welfare” (Fraser, 1984, p. 233). Neoliberal policies, in reinforcing a ‘user pays’ mentality and the idea that each individual is responsible for their own circumstances, leads to the configuration of society as “group of individual entrepreneurs and consumers” rather than a public (Brown, 2005, p. 43). As a result, the power of unionism and collectivism has been undermined and the capacity of state services such as welfare and free health and education has been greatly diminished.

A second important aspect of neoliberalism that has contributed to the loosening of deep social bonds is the principle of competition. Again, it should be mentioned that competition itself is not a new aspect of capitalism. Rather, it has been amplified by deregulation and reluctance of successive governments in Anglo-American countries to interfere in the economic sphere. Under neoliberalism, this kind of unchecked competition has become the principal organising force not only in the market but in society (Brown, 2005). To explain the impact this has on the neoliberal subject, Bauman uses the metaphor of the ‘hunter’ who, due to the aforementioned decline in collectivism and state social services, is compelled to focus on their own welfare and prosperity in an increasingly precarious socio-economic context. Bauman’s hunter accumulates kills to “fill their game-bags to capacity” whether they need to do so or not (Bauman & Haugaard, 2008, p. 113). They are focused on accumulating material wealth and status and rarely consider the effects of their actions on other people, the environment or posterity (Bauman & Haugaard, 2008, p. 113). It seems that Fromm’s ‘freedom from’ includes this freedom from seeing oneself as part of a long line of generations. It cuts one off temporally so that one only need worry about oneself. While

being a successful hunter may earn an individual admiration and praise, the underside of this kind of rationality is that the neoliberal subject must keep up a constant effort lest they be overtaken by other competitors, which could result in admiration turning to condemnation. Unfortunately, because the neoliberal subject is used to seeing every success as a product of their own individual choices it seems equally that any failure they experience must also rest solely with them. Thus, the rationality that is adopted to avoid anxiety and aloneness actually engenders these experiences.

In 1905 when Weber described capitalist rationality as an ‘iron cage’ he was positing that this cage not only enforced the economic world but controlled and perpetuated values and attitudes in social life. Over one hundred years later his metaphor has been revived: under neoliberalism “everyone is enjoined to construct their own individual little ‘iron cage’” (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 262). Here, Dardot and Laval modernise Weber’s metaphor. These ‘iron cages’ represent the rationality that not only excludes other options but renders the contemporary subject of neoliberal capitalism individualistic and competitive. It may appear paradoxical that freedom from secular and religious powers lead not to freedom itself but to another, perhaps more tenacious kind of domination, yet Fromm’s analysis of freedom from and freedom to can help explain the contradiction. Capitalist rationality still governs economic, social and inner life. If anything, the foreclosure of other options that Weber and Fromm observed has been heightened in the twenty-first century. Individuals in Anglo-American countries may have freedom from oppressive external structures, yet they cannot attain positive freedom while they are still caged by neoliberal capitalist rationality.

Fromm did not condemn capitalism; in fact, he criticised those who were unequivocal in their criticism of it. Rather, he saw capitalism as proof that an economic system had the potential to fulfil the material needs of humans so that they could all achieve freedom to find

occupations that were fulfilling, think creatively and most importantly act outside the boundaries of narrow rationalities, if only it was organised to do so. At the same time, one unfortunate and paradoxical result of gaining ‘freedom from’ oppressive systems of governance and replacing them with capitalist rationality is that humans in their own individual iron cages do not have the strong bonds or collectivity that could potentially allow them to organise the means to positive freedom.

Palahniuk’s Novels: Naming the unnameable

Palahniuk successfully depicts aspects of neoliberal capitalist subjectivity through his characters. He portrays characters who inhabit societies in which they have freedom of movement, choice and speech; characters who have what Fromm refers to as ‘freedom from.’ However, they are missing what Fromm refers to as ‘freedom to’ or positive freedom. They follow conventional, accepted modes of thought and ways of living that are dictated by their societies, and struggle to think and act outside these parameters. In these ways, Palahniuk’s characters mimic the position of the subject of contemporary neoliberalism. For neoliberal subjects, on the one hand subscribing to neoliberal rationality is an attempt to merge into a stable world of known entities, yet not only does the adoption of this way of being lead to what Fromm describes as a “loss of self” (1942/2001, p. 259) but the precariousness of neoliberalism shapes subjects who, even having ‘bought in’ to the system, are anxious and isolated. Palahniuk’s characters, as with the neoliberal subject, suffer from finding themselves in this double bind.

Rather than using realism in his novels to depict neoliberal rationality, Palahniuk takes elements of reality and magnifies and distorts them. His characters are hyperbolic caricatures and his novels feature not only improbable but impossible events. Taking this into account, this section argues that the outlandishness of Palahniuk’s characters serves as an

effective critique of contemporary society because of the way they position the reader. Palahniuk's characters firstly alienate the reader with their outrageousness, selfishness and lack of empathy, causing the reader to distance themselves from the characters and initially preventing identification with them; the characters seem ridiculous or 'extraordinary' as do the situations they find themselves in. This precludes empathy and allows for the "distance and reflection" that Herbert Marcuse claimed is essential to seeing one's society as it really is (1964/2002, p. 70). Once the distance is achieved, as Palahniuk's novels progress the reader may slowly come to the realization that on a more essential level, minus the miracles, violence and absurd coincidences, the worlds and characters that Palahniuk creates are not so unfamiliar or extraordinary. Rather, 'natural' ways of being in neoliberal society are made into the extraordinary via Palahniuk's satire, symbolism and hyperbole. In this way, Palahniuk's novels can be seen as doing the work described by Marcuse when he declared that the "encounter with the truth of art happens in the estranging language and images which make perceptible, visible, and audible that which is no longer, or not yet, perceived, said, and heard in everyday life" (1977/1978, p. 73).

One aspect of neoliberal life that Palahniuk seeks to unveil and investigate is the anxious isolation described by commentators such as Bauman (2000) and Dardot and Laval (2013). As previously mentioned, Palahniuk's novels usually begin by focusing on a lonely character in crisis. Generally, these characters are unlikeable – they are focused on themselves and meeting their own needs however they can. In *Fight Club* (1996), the narrator's need to travel constantly for work affects his ability to create relationships and he initially seems to live his life without any meaningful human contact at all aside from the self-help groups he frequents to achieve emotional catharsis. The characters in *Invisible Monsters* (1999) operate within a celebrity obsessed, fluid neoliberal society, where people are commodities, relationships are disposable and change and flexibility rule. Tender

Branson, the protagonist of *Survivor* (1999) becomes a “famous celebrated celebrity religious leader” (p. 89) yet feels completely alone despite the adulation of his fans. *Choke* (2001) and *Snuff* (2008) both focus on characters with dysfunctional family relationships who use sex so that they can numb their anxieties, however fleetingly. Instrumentality having penetrated even the most intimate of relationships, these characters find themselves not only using and disposing of others but being used and disposed of themselves. Contentment and tranquillity are absent from Palahniuk’s worlds. His characters resemble the contemporary neoliberal subject in that they have ‘freedom from’ but they do not yet have the ‘freedom to’ exist outside the bounds of neoliberal rationality. Part of this rationality is seeing others as a means to an end; as such, they struggle to have fulfilling relationships.

It is useful at this point to survey the theme of disconnection in *Fight Club*, given that the novel’s representation of the poverty of human relationships is one of the most discussed aspects of Palahniuk’s best-known novel. At the beginning of *Fight Club*, the narrator lives a life that is devoid of meaningful human contact. This is not because there is a dearth of people around him; the narrator, like the neoliberal subject, in fact lives a life of superficial connectedness, as represented most notably by the “single-serving” friends that he meets while travelling for work (p. 31). He forms brief relationships with these people before parting with them, never to see them again. Rather, the narrator’s problem is that his interactions and relationships do not go beyond the level of transaction. He sees his “single serving” friends instrumentally, as a means of passing the time when he is travelling for work, and they see him in the same way. The only access the narrator has to any real emotion is in the self-help groups he frequents, which are for people with various life-threatening illnesses.

The narrator's experiences in *Fight Club* are an exaggerated portrait of the precariousness of neoliberalism, where subjects must follow the whims of the market – and life choices such as where to live or whom to have a relationship with follow career imperatives, instead of the reverse. The narrator travels often for work, as evidenced by Palahniuk's listing of the many airports he 'wakes up' in. "You wake up at Air Harbor International... You wake up at O'Hare. You wake up at LaGuardia. You wake up at Logan" (p. 25). Waking up in all these different locations, it is unsurprising that the narrator lacks real friendship. Yet, like the neoliberal subject, he is compelled to go where his job takes him, in the hope of developing a successful career. Fostering in-depth connection is not a priority. *Fight Club*'s narrator lives a life where he is responsible only for himself, free of deep ties. Yet the narrator's freedom represents a very narrow kind of freedom. His ability to make choices as a consumer, go where he pleases, find a job that brings him some financial security and buy a nice apartment is not equivalent to the kind of freedom to be who he wants to be and thus to connect genuinely with others.

The narrator's isolation is symbolised by his home. He lives in "a condominium on the fifteenth floor of a high-rise, a sort of filing cabinet for widows and young professionals. The marketing brochure promised a foot of concrete floor, ceiling, and wall between me and any adjacent stereo or turned up television" (p. 41). Reminiscent of Palahniuk's claim that the American Dream is "some lovely isolated nest where you can invite only the rabble you like" this is "an environment you can control, free from conflict and pain. Where you rule" (Palahniuk, 2004, p. xv). Interestingly, the narrator also describes his home as a nest, explaining that after working for years to buy furniture and homewares "you're trapped in your lovely nest" (1996, p. 44). There are many such points of intersection between Chuck Palahniuk's fiction and nonfiction work, further highlighting that he writes about his own society. In describing being trapped in his lovely nest, the narrator of *Fight Club* echoes

critical discussions of the hold capitalist rationality has on subjects of neoliberalism. It ‘traps’ people – like Weber’s iron cage – in that even when people begin to realise, like the narrator does, that their lives are not quite as they would like or that there is something missing, it is almost impossible for them to imagine other ways to be. There appears to be no ‘outside’ of neoliberal capitalism – it forecloses other options as did the capitalist rationality that Weber observed over one hundred years ago. Additionally, there are advantages to continuing to subscribe to neoliberal rationalities, even if one has doubts. For many people, there is the potential for success, material comfort and, of course, freedom from oppressive intervention in private life. The ‘lovely nest’ holds significant allure, despite the fact that it is isolating and impedes ‘freedom to’.

It is clear that the isolation of individuals extends beyond the home when the narrator describes his workplace in similar terms: “Everything is industrial low-pile grey carpet spotted with little tomb-stone monuments where the PCs plug into the network. Everything is a maze of cubicles boxed in with fences of upholstered plywood” (p. 138). Both home and work demonstrate the same careful organisation of individuals. Every individual has their piece of protected space, separated from others by concrete or wood designed to keep others out. At work and at home, despite being closely surrounded by people, a specific piece of space has been carved out for the narrator and the impact and presence of others on him is minimised. The structure of the physical environment creates a distance that is difficult to traverse, enforcing separation. In such an environment, physical proximity may exist but emotional proximity is discouraged. These spaces represent the position of the neoliberal subject, physically close to people and yet isolated.

According to Žižek, the narrator aptly represents “capitalist subjectivity best exemplified by the figure of the lone monadic individual who, alone in front of the PC screen,

communicates with the entire world” (2003, p. 116). The narrator’s personal isolation in a world of hyper-connection is further reinforced by his fascination with “those space monkeys” (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 12). The ‘space monkeys’ are monkeys that are sent into space to test space technology and which, being viewed as expendable, are used only while they can fulfil their purpose and then abandoned to a slow death. Directly comparing his life with the lives of the space monkeys, the narrator draws similarities between them: “You do the little job you're trained to do. Pull a lever. Push a button” (p. 12). The narrator returns to the space monkeys many times throughout the novel. He is fascinated with the monkeys because he cannot yet articulate his feelings of isolation and expendability. He also begins to feel that rather than being a free and unique individual he is anonymous and acting, to some extent, against his will. This coincides with Fromm’s automaton of monopoly capitalism, who is “identical with millions of other automatons around him” (1942/2001, p. 158) in that he makes decisions he takes to be his own but are actually “submission[s] to convention, duty or simple pressure” (p. 172).

Another way the narrator articulates his lack of connection with others, one that highlights a slightly different aspect of neoliberal rationality, is when he explains that in a club “everyone feels like the centre of attention but completely cut off from participating with anyone else. You're the corpse in an English murder mystery” (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 88). With this metaphor, Palahniuk captures the lack of connection between individuals who are used to seeing others instrumentally. The neoliberal subject is prone to seeing others as means to an end. Because of this, they often cast themselves as the active subject while others are passive objects. The irony of this is, of course, that everyone casts themselves in the role of actor or subject and so, each person thinking they are the centre of attention, they are all isolated from each other. The reciprocity vital for deep relationships is impossible under such circumstances.

Palahniuk's use of symbolism and metaphor, in which his narrator confronts his existence via the environments he inhabits and the forms of the space monkey and the corpse in a murder mystery, at first seem to have little to do with the contemporary existence in neoliberal societies. Herbert Marcuse (after Brecht) argued that fiction can challenge capitalism by creating new realities in which the commonplace norms and rationalities of capitalist society "assume the features of the extraordinary" (Brecht, quoted in Marcuse, 1964/2002, p. 70). In *Fight Club*, Palahniuk makes ordinary ways of being extraordinary. His use of symbolism and metaphor allows the reader the distance to begin to recognise aspects of their own society in these seemingly incongruous images. He creates a space between the reader and the capitalist ways of being that are so familiar to them that they pass unchallenged. Ideally, this allows the reader to 'see' that the beliefs and practices of their society are contingent rather than inevitable. The narrator's beautifully ordered, yet lonely, home, his isolation from others and his simultaneous desire for a different life and inability to imagine such a thing at first appear to be extreme and hyperbolic, yet ultimately the narrator's experiences reflect part of the reality of living in neoliberalism.

Invisible Monsters

The distance neoliberal rationality produces between individuals is similarly explored in *Invisible Monsters*. This novel follows Shannon, who, formerly a model, is used to being judged by – and celebrated for – the marketability of her physical appearance. Indeed, in the socio-cultural landscape of this novel human 'value' is interpreted solely in its narrowest economic sense; there is an equivalence between a character's marketability and their essential worth. While this may, for some readers, seem an unrealistic prospect, it is very similar to the capitalist dynamic that Fromm describes in *Fear of Freedom*. He explains that human qualities have become commodities and argues that just as the market dictates the

availability of commodities, so it dictates the value, and thus availability, of human qualities. He explains that “If there is no use for the qualities a person offers, he has none; just as an unsaleable commodity is valueless though it might have its use value” (1942/2001, p. 103). Just as a value-less commodity may eventually disappear from store shelves, so certain human qualities become rarer as they are perceived as having no value, resulting in a society of subjects who are increasingly similar in specific ways. Such a rationality precludes the freedom to be spontaneous, original or creative. This is the situation that Shannon begins to recognize. She, like *Fight Club*’s narrator, develops an “uneasy awareness” that her society confines its subjects to certain prescribed ways of being that are very difficult to think outside of (Truffin, 2009, p. 79).

Shannon does the only thing she can think of doing to try to escape her narrow way of being, though the reader is not privy to this until the end of the novel. She shoots herself in the face in an effort to obliterate her previous self and is thus transformed into an “invisible monster” (Palahniuk, 1999a, p. 198). Now she is separated from others not only by a rationality that causes human relationships to resemble what Fromm refers to as “relations between things,” (1942/2001, p. 102) but by her physical deformities. Shannon cannot speak and must wear veils all the time, making her isolation material. At the same time, Shannon doesn’t find it so easy to escape neoliberal rationality; her physical change does not bring with it an entirely new way of thinking as she had hoped, it rather just makes the previous isolation she felt, while she lived an ostensibly charmed life, tangible.

One passage, in which Palahniuk draws on the truly extraordinary, begins with a now-disabled Shannon attempting to speak to her friend Evie and a nurse, both of whom misunderstand her and both of whom translate her words differently: “I say, ‘De foil iowa fog geoff.’ And Evie says, ‘You’re welcome.’ Sister Katherine says, ‘But you just ate lunch.’

It's clear enough, nobody understands me here" (p. 53). Others' inability to understand Shannon continues, ironically, in the speech therapist's office, when the speech therapist responds to Shannon's "Mriuvn wsi sjaoi aj...Jownd winc sm fdo dencw" by saying "You don't have to thank me, it's just my job is all" (p. 58). In another passage, Shannon escapes the hospital but does not put on her veils. She finds that without her veils she is just as isolated as with them:

When I look at people, all I can see is the back of everybody's head. Even if I turn super fast, all I can catch is somebody's ear turning away. And folks are talking to god. 'Oh God,' they say. 'Did you see that?' (p. 54)

Since everyone is looking away from her, Shannon shop-lifts a turkey, but "nobody stops me. Nobody's even looking. They're all reading those tabloid newspapers as if there's hidden gold there" (p. 55). The only person who says something is a little boy, who says, "Look, Mom, look over there! That monster's stealing food!" (p. 55), at which the adult bystanders begin "reading tabloid headlines harder than ever" (p. 55). The boy gets punished by his mother for breaking the silence and bringing Shannon's existence out into the open. Shannon appears to be more isolated than ever yet, ultimately, not much has changed for Shannon. As a model, Shannon received admiration and had value because of her marketability, but she felt lonely and fraudulent. After literally effacing herself, she is no longer deemed to have any worth and no one admires her anymore, yet she is still isolated. In a way, she has always been an invisible monster.

Shannon is used to seeing others, and herself, instrumentally. The admiration she received as a model was not for her as a unique and valuable individual but for the economically valuable, and therefore desirable, physical qualities she possessed. She has always been invisible in that no one can 'see' the real her just as she has never been able to properly 'see' other people. Again, a productive parallel can be drawn from Fromm who

argues that capitalist rationality replaces one's 'true' self. In a neoliberal capitalist society, humans have trouble connecting with each other because of this. Not only does capitalist rationality replace the true self, meaning that people cannot engage with each other on this authentic level, but it creates a kind of subjectivity that encourages individualism and competition. The ordinariness of this neoliberal disconnection becomes extraordinary with Palahniuk's depiction the character of Shannon, the 'invisible monster.' Initially, the monstrous, incomprehensible form of Shannon seems to bear little resemblance to the subject of contemporary neoliberalism. Yet once one considers analyses of how neoliberal rationality encourages the neoliberal subject to view others instrumentally, therefore creating a distance that is very difficult to traverse, the character of Shannon becomes monstrously familiar.

In a world in which most people feel invisible and in which there is a dearth of real connection, characters yearn not for love, but for the admiration of an audience. A large part of *Invisible Monsters* takes the form of flashbacks of Shannon's life before she was disfigured. These flashbacks confirm that Shannon has always been isolated and lacking in meaningful interpersonal connections. The novel is narrated by Shannon as if it is a play or a television show in which Shannon is in competition with everyone else for the spotlight. This style is established at the beginning of the novel. Shannon sets the scene: "This is Evie Cottrell's big wedding reception moment" (p. 11). She continues: "The only other character here is Brandy Alexander" (p. 12); "This is our cue" (p. 13); "This is everybody's cue to look at me" (p. 14); and "I have to say the three most worn-out words you'll find in any script" (p. 18). This style of narration not only highlights the competitiveness of Shannon's world and the jostling for admiration that the characters must take part in, but it also makes evident Shannon's deep cynicism of others' motivations. If Shannon herself feels like she is constantly acting, not being herself but adopting a mode of being that will garner her admiration and success, then she has reason to think that others will do the same. In fact,

Palahniuk makes it clear that it isn't only Shannon who views her life in this way. At one stage, when she begins to speak out of turn, Brandy Alexander tells her "Don't step on my lines" (p. 85).

In one of the flashbacks Shannon and Evie go to a department store to spend time in the reproduction bedrooms and lounges, those "fakey reproductions of natural habitats they build at zoos...those concrete polar ice caps and those rainforests made of welded pipe trees holding sprinklers" (p. 70). This is something that they do regularly. Here, in the vein of 'reality' television, they attract attention from store patrons, who watch them as they paint their toenails and have revealing personal conversations. The characters know that the audience is fickle and their admiration is fleeting. Divulging shocking secrets retains the audience for longer, so the characters try to out-do each other with what they reveal about their dysfunctional families and childhood abuse (pp. 72-73). Sometimes they "pretend to slap each other hard across the mouth" over a man (p. 72). Throughout, Shannon narrates events as if they are acting: "I'd go to flop on the bed, centre stage, hugging a pillow" (p.72); "I'd throw myself off the bed and shake my hair..." (p. 73). The environment is 'fakey' and so are Shannon and Evie. These characters inhabit a world in which certain ways of being are expected and they do their best to act in these ways, to outdo each other in their aping of the ways they think they are meant to be. They are so fake as to be hyperbolic, yet the desire for recognition and validation at the centre of their acting is no ruse.

Palahniuk makes this explicit when Shannon says: "All this is just a power struggle for the spotlight. Just each of us being me, me, me first. The murderer, the victim, the witness, each of us thinks our role is the lead. Probably that goes for anybody in the world" (p. 16). As is typical of Palahniuk's style, this idea is repeated in a slightly different way later in the novel: "Everybody here thinks the whole story is about them. Definitely that goes for

everybody in the world” (p. 272). Here, Palahniuk creates what he refers to as a ‘chorus’ (Palahniuk, 2004, p. 143); a phrase or image that he returns to regularly and with which he reiterates key themes and messages. This particular chorus appears to build upon ideas that he introduced in *Fight Club* with the narrator’s ‘you’re a corpse in a murder mystery’ metaphor describing how “everyone feels like the centre of attention but completely cut off from participating with anyone else” (p. 88). Like the narrator of *Fight Club*, who found that the role he was cast in disconnected him from other people, Shannon and the other characters in *Invisible Monsters* are disconnected from others by the roles they are compelled to play: the lead, the star. As all the characters see themselves as the centre of the story, and they believe everyone else thinks the same, it is no wonder they are so lonely. Furthermore, these characters may feel they are just playing roles because they have adopted the prescribed ways of being in their society rather than having the freedom to form their own desires. They represent the situation of the neoliberal subject who does not have ‘freedom to’; that is, freedom to find out who they are and to form their own unique thoughts. Indeed, Palahniuk’s use of various techniques to include his reader in his characters’ statements suggests that he wants them to make the connection between their own life and the lives of the characters in these novels. Shannon’s declaration that ‘everyone in the whole world’ likely feels like they are playing a role at the centre of the story, and the narrator of *Fight Club*’s declaration that ‘everyone’ thinks they are the centre of attention is designed to encompass the reader and their experiences.

By the end of the novel, many secrets have been revealed, and it is clear that none of the characters really know each other; nor is the reader privy to any of these secrets until the end of the novel. Evie is actually a man. Brandy Alexander is actually Shane, Shannon’s brother. Manus, who Shannon thought herself in love with, is actually Shane’s rapist. Shannon actually shot herself in the face. Each of these characters, whether beautiful or

disfigured, is an invisible monster in that they are not seen and known by others for their real selves. In fact, having always acted in the right ways and spoken the right lines, these characters have never had the freedom to find out who they really are, let alone to truly get to know anyone else. Throughout the novel, each character acts their isolated part as the centre of their own show, and though by the end Shannon and Brandy are both aware of this and have a strong desire to change, it is unclear that this is a realistic prospect for them. How can they change if the world around them has not? Like the neoliberal subject who recognises that neoliberal rationality forms an individual 'iron cage' from which there seems no outside, these characters are in an almost impossible predicament. Yet, following theorists such as Fromm and Marcuse, the predicament the subject of capitalism shares with these characters only appears to be impossible. Both of these theorists argue that one of the first ways to challenge capitalist rationality is to begin to recognise it for what it is. With the form of the extraordinary invisible monster, Shannon, Palahniuk contributes to making visible the real situation of the contemporary capitalist subject.

Survivor

Tender Branson of *Survivor* is different from the narrators of the two novels that have already been discussed in that he was not born into mass culture. Tender was raised in an isolated religious sect called the Creedish Church and as such is used to having neither 'freedom from' nor 'freedom to.' As was customary for the second son in Tender's church, Tender was sent out into the world to send money back to the Church elders. Thus, he finds himself in a world that offers freedom from the overt interference in private life that he is used to, but that at the same time forces subjects to adopt a specific type of rationality to operate within it. Tender finds himself in the unique situation of being caught between the expectations and dictates of the church on one side and the ways his new society shapes him

on the other. In juxtaposing the conditions of Tender's life as a member of the oppressive Creedish church with his life in a society that is obsessed with money and celebrity, and bears a resemblance to neoliberal society, Palahniuk highlights the similarities between the two systems and in doing so illustrates how easy it is to condemn other societies for the lack of freedom they offer while neglecting to look closely at our own.

As a "tender" for the Creedish church in a world obsessed with money and celebrity, Tender lives a lonely life, without friends or relationships. Tender has always done exactly as expected of him. In the Creedish Church, it is only the first son who marries while the second son is turned out to work. As a second son, Tender's adulthood has been spent labouring – what the Church refers to as 'tending' – diligently so that his earnings can be sent back to the Church. His sole purpose in life is to work, which is reflected by his name; a name that is also the name of all the other second sons of the Creedish. To the elders of his Church, Tender is "a kind of legal tender, a means to an end, living capital ready for exchange" (Kavadlo, 2005, p. 16). To the Church community, Tender is a tender and nothing more. He is an object to be used, and not only is Tender used instrumentally, but he expects nothing else. He has never had 'freedom from' the commands of the church, and he has certainly never had 'freedom to' think his own thoughts and develop his creativity. The Creedish Church is obviously an oppressive society. Tender is isolated, his life focuses on work, he is used instrumentally, and his outlook has been shaped so that the narrow field within which he lives seems natural. Palahniuk's depiction of Tender and the Church community that he comes from allows the reader to distance themselves from his situation. Yet it still seems to describe the outermost limits of the neoliberal experience. Isolation, instrumentality, and a narrowing of the field of possibility are also features of life under contemporary neoliberal capitalism. One commentator draws on the similarities between Tender and subjects of contemporary

neoliberalism, pointing out that “Tender, like too many Americans, is indistinguishable from his tasks” (Kavadlo, 2005, p. 16).

Indeed, Palahniuk makes it clear that while Tender may be a vassal of an oppressive society, the society he inhabits as a worker missionary is hardly better. The house he ‘tends’ as a housekeeper-gardener-cook is reminiscent of the “lovely nest” (1996, p. 44) inhabited by the narrator of *Fight Club*. Like the apartments in *Fight Club*, the house is less a home than a holding cell for its occupants while they are not at work. Tender explains: “He’s a banker. She’s a banker. They have cars. They own this lovely house. They own me to make the beds and mow the lawn” (p. 171). Tender is used by these people just as he is used by the Church elders. His employers demonstrate success via their material possessions and spend their lives working for possessions that they never use. The garden that Tender tends, like the house, is purely for show. In fact, it is made up entirely of fake grass and fake flowers spritzed with perfume, because Tender forgoes the messy, unruly, natural garden in favour of the easy-care fake one; something his employers have never noticed. The garden is purely ornamental. Like the narrator of *Fight Club*, who spent his life working to fill his apartment with exactly the right expensive and stylish objects, the unnamed occupants of the house work all the time – they are only ever home once in the novel – for an expensive and stylish house and garden that they do not enjoy. In the character of Tender Branson, Palahniuk takes to the extreme the instrumental relations that are part of capitalist life. He has no friends, his employers ‘own’ him, and his sole purpose is to work to send money back to the Creedish Church. Yet in juxtaposing Tender with his employers it is clear that one can live instrumentally in more than one fashion. Tender isn’t free, but neither are his employers. Tender’s employers act in prescribed, instrumental ways. In this way, the reader comes to see that the society Tender has been sent out into, while different to the Church in that it is less overtly oppressive, also largely prevents ‘freedom to.’

The relationship between Tender and his employers is purely instrumental even though he possesses intimate knowledge of their space. They ‘own’ him and he does what he is told. Tender’s employers only ever give him instructions through a speakerphone, further illustrating their remove from the person who inhabits their house for most of the day. In fact, when they finally meet Tender towards the end of the novel, they only recognise him from seeing his image in the media.

The traditional idea of home posits that it is a site of our most important relationships, the centre of our place in the world (Cain, Dupuis & Mansvelt, 2017). Yet the house in which Tender cooks and cleans is sterile and lifeless. Tender’s employers care about the pristine garden as a material status symbol, just as they value eating lobster and having Persian rugs, but they neglect the human connection that is usually integral to home. As Tender says, “Behind the front door, there are rooms nobody ever goes into. Kitchens where nobody cooks. Bathrooms that never get dirty” (Palahniuk, 1999b, p. 270). At the end of his description of the house, Tender recites part of a bible verse, which is something he does intermittently throughout the novel: “Ezekiel, Chapter Nineteen, Verse Seven: ‘And he knew their desolate palaces...’ something, something, something” (p. 270). The phrase “desolate palaces” is apt. The houses reflect the wealth of their owners, performing exactly the same function as a palace. They are also desolate indeed, in the way that they create psychological distance between their occupants and others. Just like the residents of the narrator’s apartment building in *Fight Club*, the residents of such houses are physically near to each other but gulfs apart, a paradox that also aptly represents the position of the neoliberal subject who finds it difficult to traverse the boundaries between people set up by capitalist rationality.

Life changes for Tender when it is discovered that he may be the last Creedish. Suddenly, he has the attention of a large audience. He gets an agent and a publicist, appears

on television, goes on talk shows and preaches to stadium crowds. He publishes prayer books and plans a line of sportswear, a religious TV show, a fragrance, an exercise video, a biography and a movie of his life, amongst many other things. He seems to have escaped his oppressive life as a Creedish tender and has quickly attained the height of success for the society that he inhabits. Most of all, he enjoys the admiration and adoration of his audience. Previously, Tender's only companion was a goldfish: "Just something to need you at home at night. Something to keep you from living alone" (p. 157). Now, he is subject of the anonymous adulation of millions. Whilst doing a live show, Tender muses, "In the dark around me are the smiles of a thousand delirious people who think they love me" (p. 130).

On the face of it, it may seem that Tender is freer and less isolated than he was in his previous life as a 'tender.' Yet, he is very aware that the intoxicating admiration of an audience is not the same as real love and connection. He explains: "This is having a family without being familiar. Having relations without being related... This is being loved without the risk of loving anyone in return" (p. 129). Additionally, he needs to continuously work hard to retain the audience's attention. He puts his name to new products and resorts to performing increasingly amazing miracles, with the help of the magical Fertility Hollis. He is aware that as soon as he fails in some way, or at least fails to impress, he will experience the underside of fame and success; withdrawal of attention and rejection. Zygmunt Bauman's analysis of consumer culture, which he views as an integral part of contemporary neoliberalism, helps to explain Tender's anxieties. Bauman argues that to be successful, subjects of contemporary consumer culture must "remake themselves into attractive commodities" (2007b, p. 111). He argues the 'dream of fame' is currently about being "a notable, noticed and coveted commodity, a talked about commodity, a commodity standing out from the mass of commodities, a commodity impossible to overlook, to deride, to be dismissed" (2007a, p. 13). This coincides with what Tender realises in the novel: "The key to

salvation is how much attention you get. How high a profile you get. Your audience share. Your exposure. Your name recognition. Your press following” (Palahniuk, 1999b, p. 151). Yet paradoxically, the more success that Tender generates, the greater the threat of failure appears. Tender becomes a noticed and noticeable commodity, yet he finds that success does not bring satisfaction and freedom but more striving and instability. His new position brings him superficial connection with people who do not know him and who will turn on him the moment he stumbles or stops being interesting.

Moreover, Tender’s new life does not bring the freedom he hoped for. Initially, after he realises the Creedish have committed suicide, he thinks he is free (p. 167). He believes that “all his external rules and controls are gone” and that “anything is possible” (p. 167). Yet just a few pages later (*Survivor* is paginated backwards), he admits “the truth is there has always been someone to tell me what to do. The Church. The caseworker. And I can’t stand the idea of being alone. I can’t bear the thought of being free” (p. 160). Having been given freedom from the oppressive structures he grew up within, Tender, like the subject of capitalism, is lonely and anxious. In order to escape his anxiety, he adopts a capitalist rationality, after which he complains: “Already being famous was turning into less freedom and more of a schedule of decisions and task after task after task. The feeling isn’t so great but it is familiar” (p. 159). The idea that Tender is never free is a key point of Palahniuk’s in this novel. The phrase “according to” is repeated throughout. At the beginning of the novel, Tender often starts sentences with “According to my daily planner” and “according to Church doctrine.” Later, when he is a celebrity, this transforms into “according to my itinerary” and “according to the storyboards” (p. 107). Additionally, Tender often has to read off a ‘TelePrompter instead of being allowed to tell his story in his own words: “The TelePrompter feeds me answers” (p. 108). In this way, Palahniuk makes it clear that Tender is not free, despite having escaped the Creedish Church. Rather, he has swapped one

restricted way of being for another, just as Shannon did in *Invisible Monsters*. Tender is still expected to speak and act in very specific ways, at least if he wants to be successful. At one stage when Tender is being interviewed on television, he describes the journalist who is interviewing him:

How her legs look with the rest of her body is not too long. She shows just enough ear for earrings. All her problems are hidden inside. All her flaws are underneath. The only smell she gives off, even her breath, is hairspray. (p. 107)

While the society that Tender has escaped into may lack overt authoritarian interference into everyday life, people are still expected to adhere to specific ways of being and thinking, including physical appearance and personality, especially if they want to be a success. The journalist has clearly adopted the ways of being that will be most fruitful. She is an exemplary representation of what one should be in her society. Yet when Tender says that her “problems are hidden inside” and her “flaws are underneath” the reader gets a sense of the price that character has paid to be flawless; Fromm argues that one gives up their ‘self’ when adhering to capitalist rationality (1942/2001).

Fertility Hollis refers to Tender as “a control group of one” and her “only hope of seeing anything new” (Palahniuk, 1999b, p. 110). As he was born outside of “mass culture,” she hopes that she would be able to learn something from him (p. 110). However, the conclusions Palahniuk seems to want the reader to come to are that Tender stepped out of one unfreedom into another and that both societies render their subjects almost incapable of true connection. While it is easy for the reader to distance themselves from the oppressiveness and extreme order of the Creedish Church, the world of materialism and celebrity that Tender finds himself alone in has many similar elements. Ultimately, it is the similarities between the two societies in the novel that stand out, rather than the differences. In leading the reader to see the similarities between these two superficially dissimilar fictional societies, Palahniuk

allows the reader to see that their own society is not completely removed from the Creedish Church; an initially outrageous prospect.

Instrumental Bodies: Sex in *Choke*, *Snuff* and *Lullaby*

Chuck Palahniuk is infamous for the often-offensive sex scenes and crude language in his novels. The outrageous descriptions of sex in his novels can make for intensely uncomfortable reading, and he has been accused of scraping the “bottom of the barrel” (Ellmann, 2008, para. 5). Yet in this section I argue that the graphic, hyperbolic sex in Palahniuk’s novels is an aspect of the novels that most effectively conveys the spirit of ‘relations between things’ with which capitalist rationality endows human relationships.

Underneath the crude language and outrageous descriptions, Palahniuk’s characters treat sex in rather ordinary and familiar ways. Primarily, they seek out sex as a misguided way to alleviate their dysfunctions and anxieties. When their partners cease fulfilling their function, they are disposed of. Viewed thusly, the apparently outrageous, gratuitous and extreme sex scenes are used, at least in part, to unveil the position of the contemporary capitalist subject. That is, not having the freedom to transcend the capitalist rationality that shapes them, they use others instrumentally to assuage the anxiety that comes from this rationality. They are unhappy in their isolation yet do not have the freedom to explore other ways of being and connection.

Victor Mancini of *Choke* is a sex addict who loves the “anaesthetic quality of good first-time anonymous sex” (2001, p. 186). He uses sex to try to escape his emotions and life in general; a dead-end job at an historical theme park, money problems and a mother with Alzheimer’s. Reinforcing the idea that Victor uses his sexual partners as means to this anaesthetic end, Victor obliterates the humanity of his partners. The reader never really

knows anything about these women. For example, during one sex scene, he describes almost every aspect of his partner in relation to an object. The things that Victor notices about his partner are that her face is “waxy with too much moisturizer” (p. 173), her skin smells like a “hot-plastic tanning-bed” (p. 173) and feels “hot and damp as if you could squeeze out warm soapy water” (p. 174). Additionally, “she has the long neck and sloped shoulders of a wine bottle” (p. 175). Victor’s description is more a dispassionate inventory than a portrayal of a fellow-human. Likewise, his descriptions of sex itself are often mechanical. As well as “pistoning” (p. 15), Victor talks about “ramming at a regular steady pace,” and being “plugged in” (p. 210). These mechanical descriptions reflect Victor’s view that the women are things to be used for his own ends. This is made clear when he explains: “It’s not that I don’t love these women. I love them just as much as you’d love a magazine centerfold, a fuck video, an adult website” (p. 17). To Victor, the women are equivalent to sex aids that can be bought and sold: his most intimate relationships are instrumental.

It would be a mistake to believe that Palahniuk’s portrayal of Victor’s behaviour is an endorsement of it. One reviewer mentions that, with *Choke*, Palahniuk “builds a surface of moral decay” (Adams, 2001, para. 5) yet acknowledges that there is a “mature poise and polish to his writing” (Adams, 2001, para. 6). He adds: “Victor describes how we get through our lives” (Adams, 2001, para. 6). This latter statement dovetails with my argument that Victor highlights one of the primary ways that the subject of capitalism attempts to manage their anxieties; that is, they “escape...into new dependencies and submission” (Fromm, 1942/2001, p. ix). Victor uses sex to try to escape the anxiety and powerlessness he feels in his life, in which he is a lone individual with few or no strong social ties. Following Fromm, his anxiety could also be prompted by his adoption of a rationality that leaves no prospect for ‘freedom to’ or real originality and individuality. Instead, the creative self is given up and instrumental ways of being are adopted. Viewed from this perspective, Victor uses the sex act

to combat his fears about how he is living his life, to quell his anxiety about his isolation, and to forget himself – or at least his inability to develop an original self. Victor is an addict because while the sex may fulfil its purpose while it lasts, he is left all the more bereft when it ends. However hard he tries, his numerous sexual partners cannot make him feel less alone or more human.

Victor's use of his partners can also be understood in terms of what Bauman refers to as the society of consumers. Bauman likens internet dating to shopping, in that one browses dating profiles like they browse the shelves of a store or the pages of a catalogue (2007a, p. 17). The subject who uses the dating site sees others as objects to be chosen and used, sometimes forgetting that, having entered the structure of the dating site, they themselves are also objects waiting to be chosen. They are simultaneously the chooser/subject and the choice/object, and as such are prone to being disposed of in a society that virtually celebrates the disposal of the old and acquiring of the new (Bauman, 2007a, p.57). In *Choke*, Victor epitomises the subject/object dichotomy of neoliberal capitalist subjectivity. Victor knows he is using his partners, yet he doesn't want to be used. He doesn't like his partners, though he wants them to like him. On the one hand, he is dismissive of his partners. He declares, in a perversion of Keats' words, that "even the most beautiful thing is only a joy for about three hours, tops. After that, she'll want to tell you all about her childhood traumas" (Palahniuk, 2001, p. 16). On the other hand, he is deeply insecure. Palahniuk intersperses crude descriptions of sex with moments of Victor's plaintiveness. Victor narrates one scene in which his sexual partner is on top of him, "Pistoning up and then slamming down" (p. 15). Yet the scene is broken by Victor asking: "Now that we know each other...Nico? Would you say you liked me?" (p. 15). Living as an object waiting to be disposed of makes Victor miserable and insecure and turns him further towards his sex addiction, because at least when having sex, he can "feel nothing" (p. 19).

Like the sex scenes in *Choke*, the sex scenes in *Snuff*, despite their graphicness, are mechanical and devoid of eroticism. In this novel, set almost entirely backstage of a world-record-breaking gang bang, the central performer, Cassie, is completely disengaged from the sex; indeed, her place in the novel is again reminiscent of *Fight Club*'s corpse in a murder mystery. She is the centre of the action but at the same time detached from others, who see her body parts rather than her humanity. One of her partners, 'Number 137,' describes his experience on set: "I'm pumping away, in her vagina, in her bottom, in her hand, between her breasts...my erection's going in and out, in and out" (2008, p. 143). Compounding this lack of sensuality and highlighting the emotionless and mechanical quality of the events, the descriptions of sex in the novel are fragmented. The sex is deconstructed into a series of separate acts. Some of the less graphic of these include "eating snatch" (p. 27), "ejaculating on cue" (p. 55), "flogging their meat" (p. 100), "stuffing her doggy style" (p. 167) and "nailing her on her side" (p. 167). Throughout the novel Palahniuk's words mimic the pornographic camera shots that divorce actors from their acts, and the humanity of the participants is consistently negated. Their bodies are referred to with crude slang terminology and, with the many graphic descriptions of genitals, such as when one porn star is described as "no fuzz on his nut sack" (p. 28), the body parts of the characters are what is emphasised. This separation of body part and person is reinforced by the discussion in the novel of the dildos and replica vaginas and breasts that are modelled on the real body parts of porn stars. These porn stars are commodities but, even more significantly, they are broken down into their valuable parts and these parts are also commodified. Their wholeness as well as their humanity has been effaced.

Again, while on the surface it may appear, as Ellmann (2008) has suggested, that Palahniuk employs sexual images gratuitously in this novel, when read alongside critiques of capitalism his writing appears to explore aspects of neoliberal capitalist life that are

commonly ignored or uninterrogated. One of these, the place of sex in capitalist society, was addressed by Herbert Marcuse in his book *One Dimensional Man* (1964/2002). Marcuse explains that technological and material progress contributed to circumstances in which sexuality, previously sublimated into high culture and art, was liberalized and subsequently thoroughly commodified in the middle of the twentieth century. With this commodification, a wider range of sexual expression was socially sanctioned. Unfortunately, according to Marcuse this desublimation has also maximised “localized sexuality” or physical gratification, while minimising eroticism and sensuality (p. 77), the former of which does not require contemplation of the Other. Compounding ‘localized sexuality,’ the thorough commodification of sexuality has further lowered the potential for connection via sex. *Snuff*, with its completely disconnected sex, not only emphasises the commodification of sex – which it also literally portrays – but the inability to form connections that attends this commodification.

The sexual words and images Palahniuk uses are jarring when read in a novel. Yet, interestingly, the same words and images, which dehumanize and serve to commodify and isolate human beings, are quite normal found elsewhere in society, especially in the ubiquitous pornography that pervades the social landscapes of many Western societies. The alarm and vexation that Palahniuk’s sex scenes prompt seem to occur because the sex scenes occur in literary fiction, yet in literary fiction they serve a different purpose than they may in other media. Ellmann (2008, para. 10) declares that “Palahniuk has come out of his burrow only to tell us he has nothing to say — unless it’s that porn has ruined sex. But we knew that already,” however I am arguing that these jarring, unsettling words and images serve a much more important purpose than Ellmann’s evaluation suggests. That is, they reveal the pervasiveness of the instrumentality with which humans treat each other under contemporary capitalism. Furthermore, the reception of the novel further highlights the absurdity of a

society that tolerates these images and words everywhere else except in a novel, where they at least have a purpose outside strict objectification.

Finally, Palahniuk depicts characters whose disconnection from one another during sex is deliberately hyperbolic. In several novels, bizarre circumstances serve to ensure that one partner isn't even conscious that the act has taken place. In portraying moments of such exaggerated disconnection, he is trying to make visible the disconnectedness inherent in neoliberal rationality and relationships. An example of extreme disconnection during sex occurs in *Fight Club*, when the narrator is completely unable to admit his sexual feelings for Marla. Instead, he maintains that he dislikes Marla and relies on his other personality, Tyler, to have sex with Marla for him; he only finds out that he has been in a sexual relationship with Marla when she tells him towards the end of the book:

“Have we ever had sex?

‘You are such a piece of shit.’

Have we had sex?

‘I could kill you!’

Is that a yes or a no?” (p. 159).

The narrator is so disconnected from others and so incapable of expressing emotions that he needs to conjure up Tyler to have sex with Marla on his behalf.

Similarly, action in *Lullaby* stems from a horrific act of disconnected sex. Carl Streator accidentally has sex with his dead wife the morning after she dies in bed beside him. In a departure from his usual descriptions of sex, Palahniuk's description of this sex act is rather tender; the narrator is a husband describing the last time he had sex with his beloved wife. Carl narrates: “when I turned next to her, she rolled onto her back, her hair fanned out on her pillow. Her head was tipped a little toward one shoulder. Her morning skin smelled warm (p. 177). He continues: “Sun came through the blue curtains, making her skin blue. Her

lips blue. Her eyelashes were lying across each cheek. Her mouth was a loose smile” (p. 177)

The narrator describes his wife with love, yet when he had sex with her, he did not realise she was dead. The description is deliberately ambiguous; the first-time reader does not yet know Carl’s secret, and the scene reads like she is alive. On the second reading, it is both tender and horrifying: “Still kissing her warm, relaxed mouth, I pulled her nightgown up around her waist. Her legs seemed to roll apart, and my hand found her loose and wet inside” (p. 178).

This passage could be accused of being gratuitous; a scene of necrophilia designed to titillate and shock. Yet, as has been argued throughout this chapter, Palahniuk is attempting to make extraordinary ways of being that have been normalised under neoliberal capitalism. The idea that a husband could be in love with his wife yet have sex with her not realising she is dead is unlikely and ridiculous, yet it also foregrounds disconnection and problematises the weakness of social bonds in contemporary society. Read in this way, the scene is less shocking than sad, less gratuitous than critical of the ways in which humans fail to properly comprehend each other.

It has been argued that Palahniuk positions sex as an act of “communion” that “retains experiential capacity for non-standardized fulfilment” as well as “the potential to remain outside of any “system”” (Simmons and Allen, 2013, p. 123). This argument is based on *Survivor*, however, taking a wider view of the sex in Palahniuk’s novels into account, and the ways in which Palahniuk portrays dysfunctional, commodified and disconnected sex, it is clear that the novels do little to advance the idea that sex is an act of communion that exists outside socio-cultural structures, just as he does not simply use sex gratuitously. Rather, Palahniuk’s depiction of sex indicates that he understands it as being an act that is thoroughly commodified in contemporary society, and, following Marcuse’s theory of repressive desublimation, that is very much a part of the repressive logic of dominant culture.

While the dominant discourse on the liberalization of sex and its increased availability is that it brings copious amounts of satisfaction, the characters in Palahniuk's novels represent an alternative discourse; one in which sex fails again and again to bring connection or, following Marcuse, even the enjoyment it promises. Instead, it is either used as a drug to escape the anxiety of negative freedom or wholly commodified. Victor Mancini discusses the overwhelming drive addicts have to feed their addiction, whether it be alcohol, drugs or sex, and explains that "when you compare this to other feelings, to sadness, anger, fear, worry, despair and depression, well, an addiction no longer looks so bad. It looks like a very viable option" (2001, p. 211). Palahniuk uses graphic and crude language in his portrayals of sex in his novels. It is easy to see how his sex scenes can offend; in fact, they are meant to be offensive. Despite their offensiveness, however, it is wrong to call Palahniuk's sex scenes gratuitous.

Conclusion

Palahniuk's characters are often extraordinary, and at first reading offensive, in their actions and interactions. Across *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters*, *Survivor*, *Choke*, *Snuff* and *Lullaby*, there are five very different plotlines, yet the main characters all act in very similar ways. They all lack deep social connections, and each feels a strong sense of isolation and loneliness. When they do interact with others their first inclination is usually to treat them instrumentally; as means to an end. They use others to assuage their anxieties, to garner themselves more attention and to generate a profit. In *Choke* and *Snuff*, sex is thoroughly instrumental, used either to obliterate the self or to make money. Partners are used and discarded, and any potential for sex to create connection is lost in its commodification.

Palahniuk's characters are lonely, yet despite their efforts at reaching out they are wholly unable to form enduring relationships. For some of Palahniuk's characters, particularly Shannon and Tender, the admiration of an audience replaces romantic or familial love. Yet as the attention of the audience is fleeting, they must compete fiercely for the limelight. In order to ensure the continuance of their success, many of the characters find themselves performing a role, whether it is Shannon's famous model, Tender's celebrity religious leader, Cassie's infamous porn star, or even the narrator of *Fight Club*'s more traditional role as a successful young professional.

The loneliness of Palahniuk's characters, coupled with their feeling that they are enacting a role, can best be understood using the ideas of Erich Fromm. Viewed through Fromm's theories, Palahniuk's characters have 'freedom from' in that they are not governed by an oppressive government and their lives are not ordered by any incontrovertible socioeconomic hierarchies of the kind that existed in feudal societies. On the contrary, it appears that they occupy a world of limitless choice as to what career to pursue, what to buy, where to go and how they can create themselves. Yet, as they all discover, they do not have the 'freedom to' develop a unique self; they are each enmeshed in a system that renders them in particular ways, that forces them to narrow, instrumental and competitive roles. Ultimately, the choices available to them render them the same as everyone else. They are individuals, navigating complex societies alone, yet they lack any real individuality.

Palahniuk has been charged with using his fiction to tell us things that we all 'know already.' However, I argue that Palahniuk attempts to explore ideas that are in fact not often perceptible in mainstream discourse; ideas that we do not all 'know already' or that we know but choose to ignore in our day to day lives. One such idea is that the neoliberal subject is in the same position as Palahniuk's extraordinary and exaggerated characters; they, too,

approach their relationships with a spirit of instrumentality and competitiveness and they, too, find themselves compelled to perform a role that has already been delineated for them by neoliberal capitalism.

As will be returned to in the final chapter, Palahniuk's characters often realise they have been forced to adopt certain ways of being. They desire change – they want to find 'freedom to.' They reach out to others to alleviate their isolation. Yet they are often limited by the very rationality that they are trying to evade. From this perspective, Palahniuk's novels are important in that they highlight some of the difficulties inherent in any attempt to think outside established systems, to found new roles and find new ways of being. Understanding these difficulties can have real-world consequences for anyone trying to challenge either neoliberal capitalism or popular politics.

“It’s What We Do – Turn Ourselves into Objects”: Reification and instrumental reason in Palahniuk’s fiction

On his official website, Palahniuk observes that “more often than not, kids are sort of taught or trained to be the best possible cogs in some big corporate machine... They are sort of taught to be just good employees, to just fit in” (as cited in Collado-Rodriguez, 2013a, p. 13). He explores this with his fiction, though the characters in his fiction are not just ‘good employees’ or ‘cogs in some big corporate machine’ but self-making-and-marketing commodities. As such, they strive to sell themselves (some of them become extremely popular and saleable) they are compelled to outstrip the competition and, like any commodity, they face being deemed useless or undesirable and subsequently ‘thrown out’ or discarded.

This strange dynamic, in which the characters of Palahniuk’s novels come to be akin to objects, can be clarified further by reading the novels alongside Max Horkheimer and György Lukács. Horkheimer (1947/2013) argues that, under capitalism, people have generally come to lack ‘objective reason.’ Unable to analyse their situations objectively, they succumb to ‘subjective reason,’ judging all actions and people from their perspective within capitalism and thus applying instrumental ‘means to an end’ thinking even to themselves. Related to this is Lukács’ (1923/1971) theory of reification, in which the commodity system has come to appear as a real ‘thing’ in itself rather than a product of human action. Lacking the objective reason to question this, people subscribe to the system, striving to sell themselves – their own qualities, stories, images and bodies. This creates an apparent equivalence between people and objects, both of which are sold as commodities. It is this equivalence between people and objects that is portrayed in the novels; as the narrator of

Haunted observes, “It’s what we do: turn ourselves into objects. Turn objects into ourselves” (2005, p. 169).

The spaces the characters inhabit – the settings of the novels – contribute to the characters’ lack of Horkheimer’s objective reason. In these settings, capitalist rationalities appear inevitable and even natural. All boundaries have dissolved between hitherto separate spaces; the commodity system stretches everywhere, even into sacred spaces such as the church and the cemetery. There is no escape from the commodity system. Other settings, which dominate the characters, rendering them passive and lost, can be read as symbolic of the reified system of commodities itself. Importantly, the characters in Palahniuk’s novels seldom feel in control of their environment but are rather presented as lost – sometimes literally – and confused.

Having accepted the necessity to commodify themselves, these characters judge all their endeavours instrumentally, against the potential for positive financial outcomes. Yet when everyone attempts to sell themselves it creates stiff competition. This competition drives some of the characters to radical measures; they must constantly outstrip each other in order to remain desired commodities. Tender Branson of *Survivor* literally performs miracles to ensure the continuation of his personal ‘brand.’ In other novels, characters commit murder, create sex tapes (in *Haunted*), and participate in world-record breaking gangbangs (in *Snuff*). Underlying any temporary success, however, is the relentless awareness that if they paused in their strivings or attempted to opt out their place in the world of commodities they would be disposed of and forgotten; in societies where the only route to success is to adequately sell one’s qualities and experiences, the failure to do so represents a personal uselessness and brings with it disposal, the standard fate of a useless commodity. Images of landfills and once-treasured and now-discarded toys and household objects recur in

Palahniuk's fiction, and this symbolism not only represents the underside of the characters' success but illuminates the dynamics of contemporary neoliberal society.

Many of the characters across Palahniuk's novels act in very similar, instrumental ways. This, too, can be explained by turning to Marxist theorists such as Horkheimer. For a century, Marxist theorists have argued that capitalism excludes real individuality because it demands conformity with specific – calculating and utilitarian – ways of being and creates subjects who all view the world through the same lens; that of subjective, instrumental reason. For example, Horkheimer argues that under capitalism people must constantly 'adjust' themselves to an economic life that presents and sanctions a very narrow field of possibilities (1947/2013, p. 97), self-administering by the "principle of conformity" (p. 139). This is what Palahniuk describes as 'fitting in.' Despite Palahniuk's assertion in this chapter's opening quotation, however, in contemporary capitalism 'fitting in' is no longer only about getting a good job or forging a successful career as a 'cog in a machine,' but selling the *self*.

Inside the Squirrel-Maze

The characters of Palahniuk's novels are compelled to sell themselves; indeed, much of the time they appear to subscribe completely to the belief that selling themselves not only a necessity in their capitalist societies but even the unquestionably natural thing to do. Their inability to question the rationality of their situations, let alone conceive of alternatives, could represent the foreclosure of objectivity that, according to Max Horkheimer, has occurred within the last 200 years. For Horkheimer, objective reason represents the ability to situate oneself within the universe of relations and to think critically about one's position both in the greater scheme and as a human being. It is the ability to stand outside oneself and one's society to examine ideas that are taken for granted, or even to identify that certain ideas are

taken for granted at all. Subjective reason, on the other hand, is a mode of thinking that from the outset is predicated on a particular world-view that is accepted as inevitable. It is “essentially concerned with means and ends, with the adequacy of procedures for purposes more or less taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory” (1947/2013, p. 3). While objective reason allows people to see others, concepts, aspirations or experiences as having intrinsic value – as ends in themselves – subjective reason fails to see the value of these things unless they can be used to advance towards a given end (p. 4). Indeed, Horkheimer’s other term for subjective reason is instrumental reason. The instrumental world view, based on “self-interest” (p. 19), enables the reification that underpins the commodity system – reification being another key idea that can help illuminate Palahniuk’s characters.

Often described as the ‘thingification’ of systems of human actions and relations, reification occurs when a system made up of human actions and relations, and primarily the production and circulation of commodities in the capitalist market, appears to take on a life of its own and becomes a self-propelled ‘thing’ that exists in itself, outside of human action (Lukács, 1923/1971). The capitalist system of commodities is made up of numerous human actions and interactions, yet it has been reified and appears as a real ‘thing,’ acting independently of people, according to natural laws that humans are incapable of altering (Lukács, 1923/1971). Indeed, Lukács refers to the reified system as being a “second nature” in that, though created by humans, it is widely seen as being as inevitable as nature itself (1923/1971, p. 86). Having abdicated control of the system they created and ceasing to recognise it as a product of human action, humans become passive participants in the reified system. At the same time, the system takes on the quality of a subject that controls and drives action. Humans thus morph into mere objects of the system and their action is predicated on the existence of the system they created. Moreover, from within the reified system, it appears as a “perfectly closed system” with “fixed laws” (p. 89). The subject constructs their

understanding of their place in the world from their vantage point from within the system. Their inability to see the wider context further elides the possibility that they will be able to think outside the system and thus ensuring its preservation and perpetuating subjective thinking. Clearly, reification can more easily occur in a world where objective reason is in decline and subjective reason dominates. The blossoming of objective reason would allow people to see the commodity system for what it is: the culmination of human actions, relations and, importantly, beliefs about the world.

The foreclosure of objective reason means that it is difficult for the individual living under capitalism to properly analyse their situation. Instead, they conform to the instrumentality of the capitalist system, seeing themselves as passive participants in an inevitable system of commodities. Palahniuk's characters, too, act very much in accordance with this description. However, before we turn to our exploration of how Palahniuk's characters themselves demonstrate a lack of objective thinking, leading them to see themselves as acting naturally and in accordance with an inevitable system, it will be useful to see how Palahniuk's settings – the spaces inhabited by his characters – often reinforce to the characters the instrumental logic of capitalism. Relatedly, at times the settings mimic the way in which, under capitalism, instrumental reason has blurred the distinction between realms that were hitherto separate, reinforcing capitalism as being monolithic and further reducing the individual's ability to think objectively about their situation. If, as Horkheimer adduced, the subject of capitalism constructs their understanding of the world from their very narrow perspective, then Palahniuk's instrumental settings, which in many ways resemble the built-world of capitalism itself, can help elucidate how the capitalist subject's instrumental outlook is constructed and reinforced by their physical environment.

One of Palahniuk's settings that is most effective at representing the construction of subjective reason appears in *Haunted*, in which the narrator is voluntarily locked in an old theatre for three months as part of a writers' retreat. During the retreat, the narrator and the other hopeful authors have "No contact with the outside world. No television or radio or telephone or Internet" (2005, p. 83) and a great steel door bars them from leaving the retreat early. Only the organiser, Mr. Whittier, has the key – and he has hidden it. The walls of the theatre are "double layers of concrete with sawdust packed between them" (p. 119) and furthermore, the theatre is windowless; "anything that looks like a window, draped with velvet and tapestry, or fitted with stained glass, it's fake. It's a mirror. Or the dim sunlight behind the stained glass is lightbulbs small enough to make it always dusk..." (p. 120). Thus, the cloistered characters cannot see the outside at all, and though they know it is there, they slowly forget about it until the old theatre feels to them like the entire world. The narrator explicitly makes the connection between what has happened to the characters, and what happens when a person is born into a socio-economic system: "Being born, it's as if you go inside a building. You lock yourself inside a building with no windows to see out. And after you're inside any building long enough, you forget how the outside looked" (p. 102). Via the narrator's observations, Palahniuk links the characters in the theatre with the individual being born into a capitalist system that, due to the exclusion of objective reason, appears inevitable.

The setting of the theatre mimics contemporary capitalism in other ways, too. Upon entering the theatre, the characters shake off all alternative or oppositional belief systems and instead rely on an extreme iteration of instrumental reason. As time goes on in the locked theatre, the norms that the characters are governed by become increasingly harsh and dehumanising, and they become willing to kill each other in order to capitalise on the sensationalist stories they each plan to write about the writers' retreat. Yet at the same time as they function according to harsh instrumental reason, the characters lack the ability or even

the desire to change what is happening to them. At the end of the novel, when they are finally let out of the old theatre, they do not want to leave; an aspect of the novel that could represent the way in which the subject subscribes to capitalism so fully that they believe it is the natural or only way to be. The theatre in *Haunted*, like many of Palahniuk's other settings, is not expansive, not conducive to objective reason and not emancipatory, but stifling, instrumental, and at times menacing. It dominates the characters, ultimately rendering them objects of a system of relations that appears to function without them.

At other times, Palahniuk's characters are portrayed not only as hapless subjects whose instrumentality is reinforced by their external environments but as literally being dominated by the environment and objects that surround them. The latter is the case with *Lullaby's* narrator, Carl Streator, who spends part of the novel lost in a "maze of antiques" in a warehouse (2002, p. 52). While trying to exit the warehouse after a covert meeting with his girlfriend, Helen, Streator finds that he is completely unable to orientate himself: "a tight corridor of furniture stretches a few yards in every direction. Beyond that, each corridor turns or branches into more corridors...Anything short, armchairs or sofas or tables, only lets you see through to the next corridor of hutches, the next wall of grandfather clocks, enamelled screens, Georgian secretaries" (p. 50). The pair retrace their previous path while trying to find their way out, but they are "lost" and "going in circles" in the "maze of furniture" (p. 50). The antiques "crowd" (p. 51) Streator, and his discomfort is felt, in turn, by Palahniuk's reader. Yet beyond this discomfort, Streator's situation in the maze of antiques can be read as symbolic of the situation of the person living in contemporary capitalism.

Like Streator, the subject of capitalism can only see a small part of the whole at any one time; Streator can only see part of the 'maze' of antiques, the individual living under contemporary capitalism can only see the small part they play in the system of commodities.

Because of this, each environment – the ‘maze’ and the commodity system – appears, from the perspective of the individual navigating it, to be magnified in extent, complexity and power. In the case of the antiques warehouse, Streator’s ignorance of its layout means he becomes discombobulated and panicky. In the case of the commodity system, the individual’s inability to experience it as a whole contributes to its reification. Significant, too, is that Streator’s ‘maze’ is made up of antiques. For many people antiques are especially mysterious, complex and incomprehensible commodities, being as their exchange value is so detached from their use value (even more so than with many everyday commodities); though this fact is generally accepted as a natural part of an inevitable system. Thus, Streator’s experience in the maze of *antiques* is especially effective at representing the reification of the commodity system, in which the individual living in capitalism participates in a system they do not comprehend and yet accept as abiding by natural laws.

Pygmy, the narrator of the eponymous novel, similarly finds himself lost in a ‘maze.’ He experiences his local shopping centre as a “squirrel maze” (2009, p. 10), and a “labyrinth” (p. 130). From Pygmy’s perspective, the walls of objects form a “canyon” (p. 11) and tower above him, dominating him. The maze that Pygmy negotiates, like the maze that Streator negotiates, can symbolise the ‘thingified’ commodity system of contemporary capitalist society, in which each individual can only see the system partially, from their own point of view. Thus, these literary mazes illuminate the situation under capitalism in which people become subjects of a system that is itself created by human decisions, actions and relations.

Having not grown up in contemporary capitalism but rather in a totalitarian socialist regime, many of the things Pygmy encounters in American society are alien to him and he finds it difficult to orientate himself in capitalist spaces. To Pygmy, the shopping centre is a “puzzle of competition warring objects, all improved, all package within fire colors. Area

divided into walls constructed from objects, all tinted color so grab eye. All object printed: Love me. Look me” (2009, p. 10). Being an ‘outsider,’ it is unsurprising that Pygmy is overwhelmed by the confusing, commodity-saturated landscapes in which he finds himself. However, his descriptions of the fictional American capitalist context of the novel also help to highlight how bewildering and peculiar the actual capitalist system is, though those who have been born into it – like the American ‘host family’ in the novel – largely take its logic for granted. Pygmy’s narration reveals that, rather than being inevitable, from an outside perspective capitalism is not only extraordinary but potentially harmful. While Pygmy cannot be described as ‘objective,’ he at least offers a new way of seeing the capitalist world that goes some way to explaining why individuals in capitalist society conform so wholeheartedly to the injunction to sell themselves. Dominated by instrumental reason and the commodity system, and living in commodity-saturated landscapes, it is a very difficult task not to yield to this command.

Not only does *Pygmy* contain settings that symbolise the reified commodity system, it also contains settings in which the distinctions between commercial and non-commercial realms have deteriorated; in this novel capitalism has collapsed all boundaries and left a single vast commercial sphere that appears to be ordered by Horkheimer’s subjective, means-ends logic. For example, the church that Pygmy’s host family attend devotedly occupies the building where there was once a department store. This is because, as Pygmy explains, when department stores go bankrupt they “later reincarnate to become worship shrine. First sell food stuff, next then same structure sell battered furnitures, next now born as gymnasium club, next broker flea markets, only at final end of life...sell religions” (2009, p. 21). The store and the church, which in a previous stage of capitalism existed in completely different spaces whose different exteriors and interiors reflected their different purposes, are now functionally equivalent. This equivalence is not limited in extent to that drawn by Pygmy –

that both the store and the church “sell” something – but is embedded in the very physical structures that are used by the society. While under previous iterations of capitalism the architecture of spiritual and commercial realms was different to reflect different purposes, now these realms occupy the same architectural space because they are dominated by the same rationality; there is no need for them to be defined by different architectural styles. Pygmy’s narration also links these hitherto separate spaces by superimposing the description of the church on the description of the former department store: “Location former chew gum, chocolate snack, salted chips of potato, current now occupy with cylinder white paraffin encase burning string, many tiny single fire. Location former bright-color breakfast objects boasting most taste, most little price, recent best vitamins, current now feature bunches severed genitals of rose plants” (2009, p. 21). The message is clear: in the past there may have been a separation between the religious and the commercial spaces, reflecting their different logics, yet now they are one and the same.

In fact, Palahniuk takes his point as far as possible; as well as providing spiritual redemption the Church runs a range of commercial businesses. Pygmy explains that it offers “haircut parlor, franchise designer ice creams, Internet computers lab” (2009, p. 21). Later he adds to this list, mentioning a “tanning box” as well as “infinite variation beverage extracted dried coffee bean” and a “gallery ranked machines purpose build muscle through resistance training” (p. 77). The church is also planning to open a video rental business: “drop box of rental returns stationed beside poor box” (p. 77). Thus, the original space of the department store is now occupied by a church, which is supporting itself as a commercial venture by functioning as a department store. The church is not only connected with commercialism because it occupies a traditionally commercial space but is literally commercial in substance.

In *Survivor* (1999b), too, capital has reached into even the most revered of spaces; the cemetery. In this novel, Tender Branson describes the impact different art movements have had the Columbia Memorial Mausoleum, and while doing so he inadvertently charts the insidious intrusion of capital into spiritual life:

In the oldest wing of the mausoleum, the wing called Contentment, Jesus is gaunt and romantic with a woman's huge wet eyes and long eye-lashes. In the wing built in the 1930's Jesus is a Social Realist with huge superhero muscles. In the forties in the Serenity wing, Jesus becomes an abstract assembly of planes and cubes. The fifties Jesus is polished fruitwood, a Danish Modern skeleton. The sixties Jesus is pegged together out of driftwood...in the eighties, there's no Jesus, just the same secular green polished marble and brass you'd find in a department store." (p. 244)

It is the last sentence of this quotation that is the most interesting. Since the 1980s onwards – the decades dominated by neoliberalism – the mausoleum has operated using the same rationality as a department store. This reflects Fredric Jameson's (1984) analysis of capitalist spaces, in which he notes that under "late or multinational or consumer capitalism" there has been "a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas" (p. 78). With Tender's narration we can see that, capital has intruded on a formerly sacred place, which traditionally operated under different imperatives to those of capitalism, and now this space is ordered by instrumental reason.

Palahniuk's depicts, in *Pygmy* and *Lullaby*, worlds in which the logic of capital has become so pervasive that it has penetrated spheres of being that were previously untouched by it. The spiritual and the sacred have been replaced by the commercial and this is signified by the church and mausoleum's appearances: like department stores. Since both novels portray worlds dominated by subjective thinking and means-ends calculations, it is unsurprising that, in them, the reverent architecture of the past has been replaced with the instrumental architecture of the contemporary capitalist store. Indeed, subjective reason

predominates in the settings of Palahniuk's novels, which are filled with commodities that seem to govern the characters and in which the logic of capital rules. These settings, being the life world of the characters, provide important context for the characters' actions. They help explain why Palahniuk's characters subscribe so fully to instrumental thinking and why they commit so fully to the task of selling themselves.

Performing Miracles: Tender Branson in *Survivor*

Chuck Palahniuk's characters are painted in the broad strokes of caricature and their author often barely attempts to distinguish them from one another. Rather than using realism to craft characters that appear as unique individuals, Palahniuk uses the same character types repeatedly in his novels. These characters repeat phrases that appear in previous novels and exhibit the same preoccupations and behaviours as other characters. Specifically, Palahniuk produces and reproduces characters who are ensnared in systems that force them to commodify and market themselves. They apply instrumental reason to their very selves, utilizing their personalities, their bodies and their stories for economic gain. In doing so they represent what Collado-Rodriguez (2013a, p. 5) calls a "(post-) human being," a being who is less human than commodity, less person than product.

Max Weber delineated the concept of instrumental rationality over a century ago in *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). In this book, Weber draws on a remarkable passage written by Benjamin Franklin, observing that "all Franklin's moral attitudes are coloured with utilitarianism. Honesty is useful, because it assures credit; so are punctuality, industry, frugality, and that is the reason they are virtues" (1905/1992, p. 17). Likewise, Palahniuk's characters seem to view their worlds through the lens of instrumental reason. That Palahniuk's characters consistently resemble each other is thus no surprise: by recreating similar characters again and again Palahniuk effectively mimics the way that

capitalism curtails individuality by encouraging people to adopt instrumental reason and other, sanctioned, modes of being. Weber's latter statement about attitudes being 'coloured with utilitarianism' could equally be applied to Palahniuk's characters who are so accustomed to viewing themselves in an instrumental or utilitarian fashion that they find it almost virtually impossible to do otherwise.

Unfortunately, none of Palahniuk's characters appears to have access to objective reason; all they know is what they are uncomfortable with the way things are and they desire to escape their situations. Other than the ubiquitous example of the narrator of *Fight Club* (1996), it is in the character of Tender Branson of *Survivor* (1999b) that this struggle becomes most explicit. In this novel, Palahniuk makes it clear that although Tender goes from being a vassal of the oppressive Creedish Church to a subject of a society that closely resembles contemporary capitalism, the change does not release him from bondage. In fact, in some ways, the all-encompassing nature of his subjectivity as a capitalist "celebrated celebrity religious leader" (1999b, p. 167) is more insidious and complete than the obvious servitude that he lived with under the Creedish Church. As a religious celebrity, the character of Tender increasingly becomes less suggestive of a person than a commodity, or in other words he becomes Collado-Rodriguez's 'post-human being.' He even describes himself as "a product being launched" (p. 148), though, as will be seen, it is more accurate to say he becomes a series of products.

It has been argued by Foucault (1979/2008) that traditional forms of state power merely demanded that the subject make a public show of their subjectivity. In what was analogous to playing a role, once the necessary public expressions had been made and the individual was back in their private realm, their selfhood was relatively untouched by the power that they were subject to. In this way, the individual could retain some degree of

objectivity and were able to separate the different areas of their life. In *Survivor*, the Creedish Church resembles this type of traditional state power. However, according to Foucault, in the mid-eighteenth century there occurred in Europe an “intensive and extensive development of governmental practice” (1999b, p. 28), resulting in the state moving from the “practice of government” to a “regime of truth” (p. 29). The modern capitalist states embody such a regime, though there has been a magnification of this dynamic since Foucault was lecturing in the late 1970s, just before the onset of neoliberalism. In Palahniuk’s novels (as in society more broadly) the pervasiveness of contemporary capitalism creates individuals for which objectivity has collapsed: they are no longer able to discern the validity of alternative ways of thinking or being. Instrumental rationality touches their core and orders even their attitudes to themselves. Increasingly, there is no private life, no competing ideologies and apparently no ‘outside.’ Thus, while the Creedish Church attempts to control both Tender’s actions and his thoughts, it does not appear to as fully penetrate his inner self as does the commodity system of which he becomes a part as the novel goes on.

Initially, Tender is enthusiastic at the prospect of being a religious celebrity. Superficially, he enjoys his celebrity because he likes the attention it garners. The unqualified pleasure Tender initially takes in his celebrity can be understood through recourse to the capitalist commodity system. Under capitalism, the reified commodity system orders everything, even people, who consequently act like objects of the commodity system, marketing and selling themselves. As a celebrity, at first Tender hardly needs to work at all to successfully sell himself. He does not even have to cultivate a talent or quality. Rather, he can rely on his notoriety to guarantee his desirability as a commodity. In the society of the novel, as in our own, being a celebrity, for many, represents the apex of achievement. One reason for this could be, as Zygmunt Bauman argues, that in contemporary society celebrity represents being the most important, most valuable and most desired commodity and thus the

commodity that is least likely to be discarded (2007a, p. 13). An unfortunate consequence of the reification of the commodity system and the equivalence this creates between people and objects is that, like an object, the individual may be thrown away. Maintaining a degree of celebrity can make this outcome less likely.

Representing the way that individuals are compelled to commodify themselves in capitalism is Tender's agent. Tender, and thus the reader, experiences the agent not as an embodied character but only as an aggressive, insistent, voice. Palahniuk uses the repetition of "the agent is saying" to emphasise the influence this voice wields over Tender and the way it manages him via various directives: "The agent is saying: my own religious program" (p. 170); "The agent is saying: A million-dollar advance for my life story in hard-cover" (p. 170); "The agent is saying: my own exercise video" (p. 170); "The agent is saying: an exclusive for the cover of People Magazine" (p. 170); "The agent on the phone is saying: talk show circuit" (p. 170); "The agent is saying: my very own Christmas Special" (p. 169); "The agent is saying: my own fragrance" (p. 169); "The agent is saying my own line of autographed Bibles" (p. 169). The agent also demands that Tender release inspirational tapes, make appearances at Caesar's Palace, and establish 1-976 salvation hotline, amongst other things (p. 168). The agent's voice overpowers any agency Tender possesses, and the agent's decisions become Tender's decisions.

The agent's voice continues to shout at Tender throughout the novel, reinforcing to him that he must commodify himself from every possible angle: "The agent's yelling that no matter how great you look, your body is just something you wear to accept your Academy Award"; "Your hand is just there so you can hold your Nobel Prize"; "Your lips are only there for you to air-kiss a talk show host" (p. 150); "Your whole body...is just how you model your designer line of sportswear!" (p. 136). The implication is that Tender has no

intrinsic value; the only value he has is in the profit he can generate. Palahniuk makes the agent's statements deliberately outrageous and humorous, and yet simultaneously they resemble the underlying implications of messages that people in contemporary capitalist societies are inundated with every day, in a socio-cultural landscape in which human attributes are only seen as means to economic ends. By aligning the agent with the diktats of capitalism, where the self is a means to an end, Palahniuk articulates concerns which had previously been expressed by Horkheimer over fifty years before. In Horkheimer's estimation, under capitalism "Less and less is anything done for its own sake...an activity is reasonable only if it serves another purpose, e.g. health or relaxation, which helps to replenish his working power. In other words, the activity is merely a tool, for it derives its meaning only through its connection with other ends" (1947/2013, p. 37). With the voice of the agent telling Tender that every part of him is only a means to an end, Palahniuk takes the dynamic described by Horkheimer to its preposterous extreme but, in doing so, unveils it as a dominant way of thinking, thereby bringing it into the open to be questioned. The reader is positioned to find the agent's demands ridiculous and amusing but at the same time Palahniuk's satire is designed so that they recognise similar ways of thinking in their own society, perhaps helping with the development of objective reason.

Tender's commodification of himself is eventually made literal in the figure of the Tender Branson bobble-head doll. Releasing the bobble-head doll indicates that Tender and his team have almost exhausted other opportunities to capitalise on his image, thereby providing an apt parallel to the many celebrities in contemporary society who capitalise on their fame by whatever methods possible. However, the bobble-head doll also symbolises the idea that, directed by the agent's messages, Tender must sell his very self. This is further reinforced by the 'Genesis Campaign,' in which Tender will get married in "a big romantic wedding on the fifty-yard line during Super Bowl halftime. The wedding colours will depend

on which teams make it to the Super Bowl. The religion will depend on a bidding war” (p. 92). Yet as the voice of the agent continues to urge him onwards, towards the next product launch and talk show interview, Tender soon stops enjoying his celebrity and complains: “Imagine how you’d feel if your whole life turned into a job you couldn’t stand” (p. 138). Tender’s ‘whole life’ is a hated job because his ‘whole life’ entails marketing and selling himself. He is not just a purveyor of commodities; having learnt to apply instrumental reason even to himself, Tender knows that *he* is a commodity. Consequently, he gets no rest. He is nothing more than the price for which he can sell himself; there is nothing of Tender outside the “Tender Branson Media and Merchandising Syndicate” (p. 74). Furthermore, to maintain his status as valued and desired commodity, Tender must not only outstrip his competition but outstrip his own past successes in order to keep growing his ‘brand.’ In typical Palahniuk style, this is taken to its furthest extent; by the end of the novel, Tender makes weekly television prophesies and performs miracles on cue to keep the attention of the buying public and thus maintain his brand’s value.

Eventually, Tender comes to detest his life, yet he finds it extremely difficult to relinquish his celebrity. However, after coming under suspicion for murder, Tender starts going incognito in order to evade the police. Once he becomes a fugitive, Tender goes into “Attention Withdrawal Syndrome” (p. 56). and begs to be allowed to return to his old life: “I need some time, just a minute, just thirty seconds, under a spotlight” (p. 57); “I just need to be the centre of a lot of attention. Just one more time” (p. 54). Though Tender was miserable as a celebrity, he cannot stop believing in its promise that being the most desired commodity makes him valuable and worthwhile; that it means he has succeeded as a human being. He has learnt to equate economic success with his own intrinsic worth and is unable to disentangle himself from a logic, perpetuated by subjective reason and the reified commodity system, which states that he is only as good as how well he can sell himself and that, if he can

sell himself well enough and for long enough, he will finally be able to access happiness and security. Though he isn't happy or secure, he does not know of any other way to attempt to achieve these things, so he must keep trying through the means that have been provided to him. This aspect of Tender's predicament aptly highlights a contradiction often experienced by the individual in contemporary capitalism. On one hand, they may have the realisation that something is very uncomfortable and distressing about the way they must live their life, selling their attributes however they can. On the other hand, their success as a commodity is their primary source of self-worth, making it extremely difficult for them to let go of their need to sell themselves.

The comparison of Tender to an addict that Palahniuk uses goes some way to highlighting just how fundamental instrumental thinking and capitalist ways of being are to people's thinking in contemporary society. However, in other ways it is somewhat limited. Most importantly, while for an addict there is an 'outside' to their situation, namely life without an addiction, the reified commodity system is "all-embracing" (, p. 83) and appears to be "independent and permanent...the timeless model of human relations in general" (Lukács, 1923/1971, p. 95). Living within an apparently implacable system, it can appear more sensible to use its 'laws' to one's benefit than to give up and face 'disposal.' Thus, Tender is not merely addicted to fame. Rather, he is acting according to the laws of a system that appears both powerful and inevitable, and from which he feels he cannot escape; he may have been from an 'outside' society, the Creedish Church, but that society has vanished, and Tender does not have the objective reason to imagine that he could live his life differently.

Tender is controlled by the fear of what will happen to him if he does not maintain his celebrity. However, it is not really the lack of attention that is a problem for him but what this represents: that he himself is disposable and perhaps worthless. Though Tender's fear is

overblown and ridiculous, it reveals one of the fears of the subject of contemporary capitalism. If, as Bauman (2007a) suggests, being a celebrity is equivalent to being the most valued and important commodity, which in turn reflects the worth of the individual, then being a normal person is clearly to be of less value and less importance. Despite his fears, however, Tender's position becomes so unpleasant that he attempts to eject himself from the commodity system of which he feels a part. He begins this process by performing one of his 'miracles;' he reveals ahead of time the superbowl scores, a move that incenses many of his fans and makes him instantly despised. In doing so, he transforms from coveted commodity to reviled, unwanted object, thus opting out of the commodity system in the only way he can think of; by becoming worthless. At this point in the novel, his brother and a friend – both from the fringes of society and thus not subjected to capitalist injunctions to the same extent as Tender – kidnap Tender and stage an intervention to shed him of his capitalist subjectivity.

Tender's de-subjectivisation is described as "*Pygmalion*, only backward" (p. 53) and though the novel ends before this process can be completed *Survivor* expresses the hope that humans can stop seeing themselves with subjective, instrumental reason and break free of the reified commodity system that appears to control them. Yet despite the many parallels between Tender and those who inhabit contemporary capitalism, a key difference between the two lies in Tender's ability to abstain from capitalist rationalities for long enough that he is able to shed his subjectivity. Indeed, perhaps Tender is more likely to make the transition as he came from the fringes of society in the first place. For the lifelong subject of contemporary capitalism transformation does not come so easily.

Selling the Story – *Invisible Monsters*

Being subject to a reified system of commodities, people living in contemporary capitalist societies are encouraged to view their labour as a commodity, and in fact must do so even if they are unwilling to (Lukács, 1923/1971). Yet, as has been noted already, in contemporary capitalism it is not only sufficient for a person to view their labour as a commodity; they must also view all their personal resources and attributes as potential commodities. In Palahniuk's fiction, the need for characters to be successful, valuable commodities leads not only to the pursuit of celebrity but to the pursuit of sellable 'life stories' that unavoidably rely on drama and stereotypes.

The commodification of stories is clearly an interest of Palahniuk's. In his non-fiction, he speculates that viewing stories in this utilitarian fashion could lead to "a world Socrates couldn't imagine, where people would examine their lives, but only in terms of movie and paperback potential. Where a story no longer follows as the result of an experience. Now the experience happens in order to generate a story... The story, the product you can sell – becomes more important than the actual process" (Palahniuk, 2004, p. 35); the commodification of life stories could lead to people manufacturing experiences just to sell stories, privileging certain experiences over others because they sell well. Curating life in this way will inevitably lead to the *exclusion* of other experiences and life-trajectories from popular view. At the same time as actively looking for ways in which to commodify themselves, people in contemporary capitalism must "control and neutralize such parts of themselves which could be potentially counterproductive or disruptive" (Bauman and Haugaard, 2008, p. 117), the result of which is a narrowing of the field of possibility for human life.

Living life in the way described by Palahniuk, that is, actively seeking experiences for the stories they could generate, is positioned in the novels as being very different to the work and imagination that goes into writing fiction. Rather, it is akin to living through the devices of reality television with its repetitive manufacture of dramatic plots and reliance on easy tropes. Palahniuk is anxious that the ‘process’ of life will be lost; that a life lived in this way will lack authenticity and that, compelled to sell their experiences, humans will not really *live*. This anxiety overlaps with the ideas of theorists such as Bauman, who argues that the application of instrumental reason to the very self means people are fast becoming no more than “collection[s] of sellable, or difficult to sell, attributes” (Bauman, 2010, p. 25). Indeed, the problem of what is lost to humans when they must sell themselves is also of concern for Weber and Lukács. This problem manifests most directly in *Invisible Monsters* (1999) and *Haunted* (2005), which both explore the commodification of the story in contemporary capitalist society as a particularly attractive option for those who do not have other talents or resources to draw upon.

In *Invisible Monsters*, the motif of the television is used throughout the novel to mimic the role of the mass media in reinforcing and further shaping accepted socio-economic norms in a manner reminiscent of that described by Adorno and Horkheimer in “The Culture Industry” (1944/2006). Several times in *Invisible Monsters* Shannon, the narrator, relays to the reader what she is watching on the television. Shannon predominantly watches infomercials or talk shows that are formatted similarly to infomercials, and through her narration the reader can draw a parallel between the objects being sold on infomercials and the guests and their stories being sold on talk shows: both are products. For example, while watching a chat show, Shannon observes that it is formatted “like an infomercial, but as the camera zooms in on each person for a close-up, a little caption appears across each person’s chest” (p. 116). Rather than the “little caption” consisting of product information such as

would be seen next to a material commodity on an infomercial, these captions constitute “a first name followed by three or four words like a last name, the sort of literal who-they-really-are last names that Indians give to each other” (p. 116). These names include “Cristy Drank Human Blood,” “Roger Lived With Dead Mother,” “Brenda Ate Her Baby,” “Gwen Works As Hooker,” “Neville Was Raped In Prison” and “Brent Slept With His Father” (pp. 116-117). These ‘who they really are’ names reflect that from the perspective of their society these characters *are* their most sensational, sellable stories and nothing more. Everything else about them fades into the background while the one notable or notorious thing about them is magnified in order to garner the brief attention of the audience. Any other attributes or talents they have are insignificant and essentially worthless. The ‘who they really are names’ have their parallel in contemporary society, most obviously with many people receiving payment to reveal their darkest stories in memoirs or media interviews. However, this circumstance extends, to a greater or lesser extent, to all individuals who live in contemporary capitalism, dominated by the commodity form. Bauman writes that in such a world “the vision of a ‘human being’ falls apart and vanishes: the forest is no longer seen beyond those trees” (2010, p. 25). Under capitalism, people are not seen in their entirety but rather as sellable parts. Who they really are is equivalent to what they can sell.

In the absence of money, education, social capital or other resources, the characters on the talk shows in *Invisible Monsters* attempt to leverage one of the only resources available to them: their dramatic and tragic life stories. This highlights how economic imperatives lead people to utilise whatever resources they have access to. Specifically, humans ordered by a seemingly all-encompassing commodity system will, in conforming to that system, attempt to commodify even the most personal parts of themselves. In commodifying the most secret and shameful of their stories, Palahniuk’s characters conform to the expectation that they will sell themselves however they can. Yet while they act in this sanctioned and expected way, they

also open themselves to rejection. This is because their stories, while lucrative, hold only brief appeal and are furthermore largely based on circumstances that will quickly bring social ridicule and condemnation. In the novel, as in contemporary society, the media simultaneously proffers the hope that an individual can make a successful commodity of themselves by selling their sensational story and censures the very experiences that are easily turned into stories to be commodified. At the same time as it confirms the necessity for individuals to sell themselves, it condemns them for their part in the very stories they are selling, thereby raising the frightening spectre of the useless commodity that no one wants. The characters on the talk show in *Invisible Monsters* represent the most vulnerable participants in a life that is dominated by the commodity system, people who have no other assets and options and who face the very real possibility of being discarded like a no-longer-desired object.

The role of the television in *Invisible Monsters* is similar to the role of the agent's voice in *Survivor*. It represents one of the ways in which social and economic imperatives, such as that of applying instrumental reason to the self, are reinforced, adapted, and then reinforced again, leaving very little space for the objective analysis of one's circumstances. Indeed, in *Invisible Monsters* the television is positioned as one of the mechanisms via which people are relayed messages about how to *be*. However, rather than these messages being explicit, as in *Survivor*, this novel illustrates that these messages are embedded in the very methods and practices of the mainstream media, including the way they present guests and personal stories in simplistic and dramatic terms, obfuscating the entire human being behind each story. The ubiquity of television and other media sources that reinforce instrumentality all but prohibits people from being able to coherently analyse their situation under capitalism for what it is.

Selling the Story – *Haunted*

Like *Invisible Monsters*, Palahniuk's *Haunted* (2005) reflects the necessity, in contemporary capitalism, for people to commodify all aspects of themselves. The novel explores how application of instrumental reason to the self not only dictates people's actions but in doing so causes them to become estranged from their own authentic wants and desires, further allowing for the perpetuation of instrumentality. As has already been mentioned, *Haunted* focuses on a group of people who agree to go into isolation for a writers' retreat of three months duration. The novel is comprised of a linear first-person narrative that focuses on the increasingly strange events that occur during the retreat, which are interspersed with poems written by the characters and short stories in the third person that offer insight into their lives before the retreat. As he often does, Palahniuk hardly differentiates these characters from each other. This is clearly a deliberate device, as the novel slowly reveals the fact that their histories may be different, but they all act in similar, instrumental ways.

While ostensibly they all want to create great art, it is quickly revealed that the characters in *Haunted* are not so much would-be artists as would-be producers of cultural commodities. Early in the novel the production of art is connected to utilitarian aims when the unnamed narrator of the novel tells the reader that the goal of each retreat attendee is to write "a masterpiece that would buy our way out of slavery to a husband or a parent or a corporation" (2005, p. 8). The characters' desire to create their masterpiece is thus inextricably tangled with their desire to make money. They are unable to separate the two because rather than seeing a novel as an object of artistic self-expression or social exploration they view it merely as a commodity. In a perfect example of Horkheimer's subjective, instrumental reason, these characters do not see a 'masterpiece' as having value in itself. Instead, it is only valuable as a means to an end. In fact, the likelihood that any of the

characters of *Haunted* even have the capacity to be creative or original is consistently under question.

Reliant, as they are, on narrow, utilitarian ways of thinking, it soon becomes clear that none of the characters will produce the longed-for novel. The narrator explains: “Even if we never sparked a good idea, never wrote our masterpiece novel, this three months trapped together could be enough to make a memoir. A movie. A future of not working a regular job. Just being famous. A story worth selling” (2005, p. 85). That each character decides to write a memoir, a prescribed text that describes lurid, popular and easy to sell true-stories, fits completely with the overall trend in Palahniuk’s fiction of critiquing instrumental ways of being and the attendant lack of imagination. It is also reminiscent of the televised personal stories of *Invisible Monsters*. Soon, the narrator declares: “Screw the idea of creating anything original. It’s no use, writing some let’s-pretend piece of fiction. That takes so much effort for what little you get in cash money” (2005, p. 86). The blunt language of this last sentence removes all pretence: the characters never really came to the writers’ retreat to write. They came to make money. The novel mimics a reality in which the commodification of culture has led to cultural products being reduced to a narrow set of prescribed formulas that are sold again and again, and which are not only unimaginative themselves but in turn contribute to the foreclosure of the opportunity to think, imagine, create or ‘pretend.’ The literary ‘memoirs’ that the narrator and other characters in *Haunted* intend to write certainly fit easily into the mould of an unchallenging cultural commodity. Yet here are not the great producers of ‘mass culture’ described by Adorno and Horkheimer in “The Culture Industry”; the magazine publishers and television and movie studios. Rather, these characters represent people who, lacking other resources, try to sell the last resource available to them, their personal stories.

As a good memoir needs drama to sell its story, the characters in *Haunted* decide to “warp the truth. Blow it up. Stretch it out. For effect” (2005, p. 85). They “turn [their] lives into a terrible adventure. A true-life horror story with a happy ending. A trial [they’d] survive to talk about” (2005, p. 85). They each secretly begin to tamper with the heating, shower and toilet facilities and food supplies at the retreat to make their stories dramatic. Each pre-emptively casts themselves as the hero of the story who survives the ghastly conditions they were subjected to at the writers’ retreat. In an apparent confirmation of Horkheimer’s declaration that, under capitalism, “a novel is written with its film possibilities in mind” (1947/2013, p. 101), the characters of *Haunted* begin to plan the movie-versions of their stories. The narrator begins describing events as though they were watching them through a camera lens. They take down details of the ‘set’ to ensure they can make the movie authentic (2005, p. 85). One character walks around with a video camera and another speaks everything into a voice recorder. As events occur, other characters write down what is said in order that it can be used as dialogue later:

Mrs Clark steps forward, saying, “Brandon?” ...In our heads, for the scene in the movie, this scene only with a movie star twisting in fake pain on the red-and-blue Oriental carpet, in our heads, we’re all writing down: “Brandon!” (2005, p. 104)

They are hyper-conscious of how they are acting and view their own actions and the actions of others as either contributing to or detracting from the value of the life-story they hope to sell. Part way through the novel Mr. Whittier dies. Throughout his funeral, held within the confines of the retreat, each of the characters closely observes the dialogue because the funeral is “just a rehearsal. [They’re] just stand-ins for the real funeral, to be played by movie stars in front of cameras...” (2005, p. 172). Perfectly illustrating the dynamics of the reified commodity system, in which human beings become the objects of the system, the final sellable product – the movie – is more real and more significant than the lives it is based on. In *Haunted*, not only do the characters write their novels with the film possibilities in mind,

but life itself is dictated by the possibilities for its own commodification. Life is an object of the commodity system.

As the novel reaches its end, Palahniuk regularly reinforces the notion that through the course of events the characters of *Haunted* have become the characters of their own story of how they survived the hardships of the writers' retreat. Like he does elsewhere with his most significant ideas, Palahniuk first implies this and then makes it explicit. The old abandoned theatre contains disused sets, props and costumes, and this setting underscores the idea that the characters of *Haunted* are each acting, playing roles they think will sell the story the most effectively. A theatre is usually a place where actors act out characters to a paying audience; all parties know that the play is fictional and the acting only temporary. In *Haunted* the theatre is transformed into a place where people who lack an audience don character in the hopes of gaining one, but subsequently become unable to distinguish the roles they are playing from themselves. When the washing machines break the characters of the novel start wearing old costumes instead of their dirty clothes. They "wear these tunics and sarongs and waistcoats. These velvets and satin brocades. Pilgrim hats with silver buckles. Elbow-long gloves of white leather" (2005, p. 151). Later, they are described as wearing "fairytale silk and velvet" (2005, p. 177). Towards the end of the novel Palahniuk makes this symbolism explicit for his readers. When describing Saint Gut-free feebly banging on walls for rescue, the narrator explains that he is "only banging with his open hand. And not yelling too loud. Just loud enough to say he tried. We tried. We made the best of the situation by being brave, strong *characters* [emphasis added]" (2005, p. 223). Having become accustomed to interrogating their every action and its effect on the story-as-commodity, the characters of *Haunted* completely lack authenticity. They, like *Tender of Survivor*, represent the 'post-human being' described by Collado-Rodriguez, who is "devoid of the attributes that allegedly constituted the perfect humanist being: authenticity, independence and free will" (Collado-

Rodriguez, 2013a, p. 5). Instead, they play the characters they think will most easily sell, becoming more product than human in the process.

The Fate of the Commodity

As has already been discussed in depth, the reification of the commodity system that can be observed in contemporary Western capitalism leads to subjects accustomed to marketing and selling their personality, body, stories and experiences. Humans become mere objects in a commodity system that is created and perpetuated by human action, yet which appears as an inevitable circumstance. As objects in this system, humans also become accustomed to the possibility of being disposed of after they have ceased being useful, since “the ultimate logic and end of [consumerism] is disposability” (Nilges, 2008, p. 33). A key feature of modern consumerism, according to Bauman, is the speed with which one disposes of commodities once they have ceased to be useful or desired (2007b, p. 123). As a result of this, humans-as-commodities must put a significant amount of effort into adapting to the market and proving their usefulness. Many of Palahniuk’s characters, from *Choke*’s Victor Mancini to the cast of *Haunted* act within this logic, frantically trying to avoid becoming unmarketable, unwanted commodities.

Cassie Wright of *Snuff* (2008) is another such character. A porn star who is at the centre of what is meant to be the world’s biggest gangbang, it is made clear through the novel that the reason she is doing this is because she is at the end of her career and is becoming increasingly desperate for work, especially because there is a new, younger generation of porn actresses. Carrie has not had any recent success; the porn films played on set are “Carrie Wright’s greatest hits” but “none of them [are] any newer than twenty years old” (2008, p. 15). As Carrie’s career declines and she edges closer to becoming an unwanted commodity,

she must try ever harder to remain marketable and prevent being discarded. The narrator outlines her waning career; she has had to resort to increasingly shocking acts, culminating in perhaps the most shocking, bestiality, in order to maintain a modicum of success and marketability:

Pony Girl films shot for the Japanese market, where women wear saddles and bridles and perform dressage routines for a man cracking a whip. Or fetish movies like *Snack Attack*, a genre called splosh films, where beautiful women are stripped naked and pelted with birthday cakes, whipped cream, and strawberry mousse, sprayed with honey and chocolate syrup. No, nobody wants to see her last project, a specialty film called *Lassie, Cum, Now!* (pp. 16-17)

It is passages like this one that has drawn criticism of Palahniuk for being morally defunct, from commentators such as Ellmann (2008). However, as argued by Collado-Rodriguez (2013a) the “hyperparodic and grotesque” aspect of Palahniuk’s fiction “works to emphasize the lack of moral purpose manifested in so many aspects of contemporary life” (p. 4). Palahniuk’s outrageousness, the grotesqueness of his characters, rather than being an endorsement of immorality or even amorality has a strong streak of morality in it, in that it exposes the extremes to which the subject of capitalist logic is pushed in guaranteeing their success as a commodity and judges the ideological landscape that pushes subjects to these extremes.

Like Cassie Wright, Mr. 600 of *Snuff* – real name Branch Bacardi – also used to be a desired commodity; he was one of the most popular male porn performers. However, in the novel he is portrayed as a pathetic figure whose inability to acknowledge that he is no longer desirable only serves to make him even more ridiculous. *Snuff* is written from the perspectives of four different male performers, which allows the reader access to both Mr. 600’s opinions of himself and others’ opinions of him. Thus, the reader can see that Mr. 600, who stubbornly believes he is still a lucrative commodity, is not a reliable narrator; other characters offer a perhaps more truthful portrayal. For example, Mr. 600 refers to himself and

the other long-time porn performers as “us veterans” (2008, p. 1) and “industry regulars” (2008, p. 3). He is condescending to the younger men, bragging that “veteran talent wear satin bathrobes, prizefighter robes tied with a sash” (2008, p. 3) while “other dudes ain’t fucked anything but their hand” (2008, p. 4). When Mr. 137 describes Mr. 600, however, he refers to him as one of the “male dinosaurs of the porn industry” (2008, p. 12). Also telling is that Mr. 600 insists that he is doing the porn shoot “for face time and to do Cassie a favour” (2008, pp. 1-2). The implication of this is that he is not getting paid for this shoot at all.

The novel frequently returns to the image of Mr. 600 watching his younger self in porn films; many of the porn films playing on set feature Mr. 600 from his more successful days. Mr. 137 narrates: “The monitor Branch Bacardi’s watching, it shows him a generation younger...That videotaped Branch Bacardi, his pecs don’t sag and flap. His arms aren’t red with razor burn and rashy with ingrown hairs...” (2008, p. 15). Mr. 137 notes how old the porn actor is now: “Under his eyes hang crushed, crumpled folds of purple skin. Under his suntan, purple veins climb the sides of his nose. More purple veins climb his calves” (2008, p. 15). Towards the end of the novel, the possibility arises that they may run out of actors for the gangbang and thus be unable to set the world record. However, one of the characters assures the others that he called an agency to provide more performers. Mr. 600 narrates:

Dude says how this agency knows somebody who’ll do an hour for less than fifty bucks. Some old dude, the agency says, the joke of the adult industry, flabby and wrinkled, with scabby, peeling skin. Bloodshot eyes and bad breath. Some porn dinosaur the agency can’t book...
(2008, p. 160)

It eventually transpires that the ‘porn dinosaur’ is Branch Bacardi himself when his agent tries to call him to offer him the job. While the joke is on the self-important Branch Bacardi, who the reader is encouraged to dislike and laugh at, the underlying notion is not so humorous. As argued by both Bauman (2000) and Dardot and Laval (2013), under

contemporary capitalism permanent success is never guaranteed but can rather slip away at any time. This is reflected by the description of Mr. 600 as “somebody who’ll do an hour for less than fifty bucks.” In his younger days, he may have been a sought-after performer, but that success has no bearing on his current status as an object of little worth.

Mrs. Clark of *Haunted* (2005) also represents a character who has failed to adequately market and sell herself in a capitalist society. Mrs. Clark is estranged from her husband and works for Mr. Whittier on the writers’ retreat. Each character of *Haunted* reveals stories from their past, and one of Mrs. Clark’s stories focuses on the failure of her marriage. Like the other characters in the novel, Mrs. Clark subscribes to a utilitarian worldview and sees all aspects of herself and her life as means to economic ends. Influenced by this philosophy, she and her husband decide to create a sex tape to sell because “couples all except them were making extra money in their spare time. Other married couples weren’t just wasting their sex, unwatched, unappreciated by strangers” (2005, p. 141). The pair find making a sex tape more difficult than they had hoped; after working on one shot for twenty seconds they must reposition themselves and change shot, an arduous and pleasure-dulling task. The narrator, relaying Mrs. Clark’s story to the reader, explains that “their marriage was still where sex was fun, but after that first day of filming, the only thing that kept them going was the money they’d make” (2005, p. 143). The suggestion here is that as soon as something is commodified it is emptied of any value or pleasure it may have had outside the economic sphere and instead its only value is the latent value of the money it might be sold for. This aspect of the novel corresponds to a feature of contemporary capitalism, in which it is commonplace for “relations, feelings and positive emotions” to be “instrumentalized by economic strategies” (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 291). As these relations and feelings are instrumentalised a person’s ability to take pleasure in them is significantly reduced. This is reinforced in *Haunted* by the couple’s decision that once they’d made the sex tape and made

some money, “they’d never, ever have to have sex, ever again” (2005, p. 144); commodification as a process appears to be irreversible.

Unfortunately, when Mrs. Clark and her husband finally see themselves on tape, they are horrified by how they appear. They are:

Proportioned all wrong, the way mongrel crossbreed dogs look, with short legs and long necks and thick torsos with no definite waist...Worse than their everyday ugliness was the proof they were getting old. Their lips suction-cupped each other, and their loose skin looked baggy...
(2005, pp. 143-144)

They will never be able to sell the sex tape. They are ugly and old; their sex is an undesirable and unsellable commodity. Watching the tape, Mrs. Clark realises that their ugliness and undesirability “was all they were” (2005, p. 145). In a society that orders people on their ability to instrumentalise and market their actions, features and talents, two people who are unable to sell themselves have failed. Subsequently, the couple stop speaking to each other and soon they divorce. Mrs. Clark is unable to stop mentally replaying the video and turns to the writers’ retreat to escape from the society in which she has failed. Mrs. Clark’s reaction to her failed sex tape may seem hyperbolic but it highlights the feelings of worthlessness that are often generated when one fails to meet the capitalist imperative to successfully commodify themselves. Dardot and Laval (2013) posit that several symptoms can be observed in contemporary capitalist society. One of these is ‘generalised depression,’ brought on by the feeling of inadequacy felt by many people who must compete constantly to promote themselves in a vicious socio-economic landscape in which failure and disposal are the ever-threatening undersides of success (p. 291).

Serving to reiterate that the fate of the commodity is to be disposed of, images of landfills and car wreckers’ yards occur in Palahniuk’s novels. For example, towards the end of *Survivor* (1999b), Tender Branson manages to finally escape his commodified celebrity

life and reach the rural land that had been owned by the Creedish Church. Yet when he gets there, he finds it has been turned into a rubbish tip for discarded pornography. He narrates: “spreading out on the ground all around us are pictures of men with women, women with women, men with men, men and women with animals and appliances” (p. 33). As he drives through the former Creedish compound, he sees various sex toys that “cling together in smouldering heaps” (p. 35). Prior to this point, *Survivor* focuses primarily on one commodified life: Tender’s. His selling of himself is emphasised again and again. In fact, while he is driving through the used-up pornography, he hears himself on the radio, declaring: “My whole life is for sale at a bookstore near you” (p. 35). However, with the images of the discarded pornography, Palahniuk widens his critique: suggesting the extent to which the application of instrumental reason reaches in contemporary capitalism. The porn-landfill is not just filled with discarded objects; it represents many, many commodified lives. Similarly, in *Invisible Monsters*, Shannon and Evie are required to model clothes in a wrecker’s yard: “Jump way back to a fashion shoot at this junkyard full of dirty wrecked cars where Evie and me have to climb around on the wrecks wearing Hermaun Mancing thong swimwear... These junked cars all have rusted holes through them, serrated edges...” (p. 163). The juxtaposition of glamorous models wearing luxury brands with wrecked cars is an apt visual representation of consumerism. Once, the cars were brand new and advertising campaigns would have been built around them, too. Now they are discarded, unwanted and forgotten. As the cars once were, the clothes the models wear are new, desired commodities. Eventually, however, the clothes will be disposed of like the cars, and, representing as they do the situation in which humans are mere objects in the reified commodity system, Shannon and Evie, too, must face disposal.

Zygmunt Bauman argues that disposal has taken the place of accumulation as one of the most significant markers of contemporary society; throwing things away is just as an

important part of the process of consumption as attaining new things is (2007b, p.123). For Bauman, the subject of contemporary capitalism is caught in a predicament from which there is no easy escape. They use and throw away objects and they see other people as objects to be used and thrown away, yet the instrumental reason they use to sustain such a view has been turned back on to themselves. This means that if they do not successfully sell themselves they are unwanted and worthless, and even when they experience success they suffer from the uneasy awareness that they are likely to be discarded before long. *Fight Club* (1996) represents this predicament with the character of Marla who is interested in “all the things that people love intensely and then dump an hour or a day after. The way a Christmas tree is the centre of attention, then, after Christmas you see those dead Christmas trees with the tinsel still on them, dumped alongside the highway” (p. 67). She is also fascinated by “cars that people loved and then dumped. Animals at the pound. Bridesmaid dresses at the goodwill” (p. 87). As noted in the text, the things that fascinate Marla are things that were special once but that, for whatever reason, had ceased being desirable and were discarded.

Like Marla, Cora in *Haunted* feels sorry for the stuffed animals left over at the store, “the animals left behind each had an eye missing, an ear frayed, a seam split open. Stuffing poked out. These were the animals no one would want” (2005, p. 159) Neither Marla nor Cora have had any success at selling themselves, which is perhaps why they feel sympathy and kinship with these now-discarded objects and animals. The animals at the pound and the leftover stuffed toys represent to them their situation as failed, worthless commodities. In turn, the characters’ situation parallels the situation of the contemporary capitalist subject, who must not only sell themselves but accept being peremptorily disposed of when they are no longer of use. Palahniuk’s novels help unveil that the commodity system has managed to “penetrate society in all its aspects and [...] remould it in its own image” (Lukács,

1923/1971, p. 84) – even the lives of the human beings whose interactions created the market in the first place and whose actions continue to sustain it.

Conclusion

In *Haunted*, the narrator and other characters at the writers' retreat like to see themselves as the "Modern equivalent of the people at the Villa Diodati" (2005, p. 82). The Villa Diodati, located on Lake Geneva in Switzerland, is the house at the centre of one of the most significant literary moments of the nineteenth century. Lord Byron rented the villa in the summer of 1816. His guests included Percy and Mary Shelley and John Polidori. Due to inclement weather, the travellers were forced to stay inside, and, over three days in 1816, these famous literary figures encouraged each other to write horror stories for entertainment. The results were a story that Mary Shelley would later develop into *Frankenstein*, and Polidori's *The Vampyre*; the first vampire story in English and an important precursor of the vampire genre.

The narrator of *Haunted* refers to the Villa Diodati writers as a "handful of young people, trying to live outside the rules of their culture" (2005, p. 82) and imagines that those attending the writers retreat are the same. According to the narrator, both situations consist of "Just people telling stories out loud to each other. People looking for one idea that would echo for the rest of time. Echo into books, movies, plays songs, television, T-shirts, money" (2005, p. 82). With the final sentence of this quotation, the comparison being drawn between the two situations is suddenly severed and instead the differences are emphasised; the past burgeoning of original art is contrasted with the cultural-commodity production of the present. Another key difference between the characters of *Haunted* and the writers they hope to model themselves on is that the former represent life within the reified system of

commodities, while the latter, though still of course subject to the social norms and rules of their time, had not been moulded in the same all-encompassing way. The fact that the characters of *Haunted* do not recognise this difference is emblematic of the way that contemporary capitalism gives the appearance of inevitability; they do not realise their own attitudes are based on an instrumental reason that is specific to their own time and place.

Horkheimer argues that before modern capitalism, people who had material advantages could explore their hobbies and interests and ‘cultivate personality’ “not...in order to achieve a better career or for any professional reason, but for the sake of his own individual existence” (1947/2013, p. 157). In other words, people did things for the pleasure or satisfaction or challenge they got from doing them – if they could afford to. The geneses of *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* at the Villa Diodati represent such a situation, whereas the attitudes of the characters in *Haunted* parallel the contemporary situation in which all aspects of life exist in relation to the domain of economics.

Haunted is just one of the novels in which Palahniuk explores his expressed interest in the ways in which the capitalist injunction to commodify the self could affect human action. His writing suggests his belief that placing emphasis on the product to be sold rather than the authentic process of human life could result in a narrowing of human action and the elimination of difference and authenticity, the result of which is that people act in prescribed and expected ways. This dovetails with capitalist critiques that investigate how the prevalence of the commodity system and its attendant commodification of human qualities results in a contraction of human possibilities as only the most marketable qualities and attributes prevail. Lukács, discussing the dangers of reification, warned that “the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker appear increasingly as *mere sources of error* when contrasted with [the] abstract special laws functioning according to rational predictions”

(1923/1971, p. 89). Humans, functioning within a commodity system that appears rational and implacable, attempt to eliminate these idiosyncratic ‘sources of error’ to conform more wholly to the system.

The fear that they will be unable to sell themselves pursues Palahniuk’s characters, compounding their need to eliminate their unproductive and unsellable characteristics while magnifying what can be sold. Having subscribed to the instrumental logic of the commodity system, their self-worth is tied to their ability to commodify themselves. They know that if they cannot sell themselves, they will be discarded like a worthless, unwanted object, and they hold this awareness even when they enjoy significant success.

The characters of *Haunted*, along with characters in Palahniuk’s other novels such as *Lullaby*, *Invisible Monsters*, *Survivor*, *Pygmy*, *Choke* and *Fight Club*, inhabit worlds, like our own, in which subjective reason has overtaken objectivity and the commodity system appears to control human action. The worlds that the characters inhabit reinforce to them repeatedly that they must apply instrumental reason to everything, even themselves, rendering them a collection of attributes to be marketed and sold – and something is lost in the selling.

The Ruins of the Future: The failed promise of change in fluid contemporary capitalism

The characters in Chuck Palahniuk's novels live in a state of flux. They transform their physical identities, using surgery to alter their bodies as easily as if they are changing costume. They experiment with hormones and clothing, and they use and discard pseudonyms. Often, they cannot seem to stay still; the road trip is a recurring feature of the Palahniuk novel. His characters go on wild journeys across the United States, journeys that have been attributed to their desire to be rid of their former selves (Baelo-Allue, 2013; Collado-Roderiguez, 2013b; Mendieta, 2005). Alternatively, these road trips can be read as representations of their need to discover their authentic self; an authentic self that, it can be argued, never existed in the first place (Mansfield, 2000). Indeed, much of the time Palahniuk's characters seem to be running away from the past into the future while completely bypassing the present.

There has been much discussion about the fluidity in Palahniuk's novels, a lot of which has centred around *Invisible Monsters* (1999). Generally, the characters' fluidity has been read positively as a movement, or at least an attempt at movement, away from a stultifying and stifling capitalist culture (Baelo-Allue, 2013; Mendieta, 2005). In this chapter, I suggest that a more contemporary and comprehensive explanation of these characters' experiences and expressions of fluidity is that fluidity is a typical aspect of neoliberal subjectivity, and that Palahniuk's characters, with their fluidity and flexibility, are representative of the consummate neoliberal subject.

One of the subtler readings of *Invisible Monsters* notes that it "is a novel about the search for identities – sexual, family, gender, social – that is never at ease with the search" (Slade, 2013, p. 81). This comment is applicable to many of Palahniuk's other novels too,

particularly *Survivor* (1999) and *Choke* (2001). It is my suggestion that the reason that the novels are not “at ease with the search” for identity is that under neoliberal capitalism the search for a sense of ‘real’ identity does not and cannot end. Thus, similarly to the subject of neoliberal capitalism, the characters in Palahniuk's novels feverishly experiment with and consume identity but, also like the subject of neoliberal capitalism, whatever they do their feeling of inauthenticity persists. They never discover the ‘real self’ they are searching for. This is because fluidity itself is a fundamental aspect of the neoliberal subject, as is the attendant feeling that one is never quite yet authentic or complete. Because of this, the depictions of fluid characters in Palahniuk's novels cannot be read, as they often have been, as a straightforward challenge to contemporary capitalism. Furthermore, the assertion that characters attempt to escape stultifying subject positions via both plurality and nomadism, and that this somehow provides resistance to capitalist ways of being, rests on a misunderstanding of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, as delineated in chapter one, and its relation to Fordist capitalism.

In this chapter I will draw on the work of Luc Boltanski, Zygmunt Bauman and others to put forward the idea that under neoliberalism, rather than being expected to conform and perfect narrow subject-positions, the subject is enjoined to be fluid and changeable; to be whatever the market needs them to be; to be forever trying on new identities, learning new skills, thinking about the future, diversifying, and practicing resilience. This is somewhat counter to the assertion, and others like it, that Palahniuk depicts mainstream society “in which life is lived out as a narrow set of default options” (Mathews, 2005, p. 83). Rather than rebelling against a set of social standards that they are expected to conform to, the neoliberal subject finds themselves adrift in a society in which there are few rules other than the imperatives of the market. This engenders feelings of anxiety and encourages the subject to form an idealistic belief in an authentic, stable self, which they do not *yet* but one day *will*

have access to. In this way, rather than actively resisting subject-positions that they are expected to take, many of Palahniuk's characters can be seen as exemplary neoliberal subjects, fully embodying the spirit of their time.

Palahniuk's characters – just like the neoliberal subject – find their fluidity discomfiting and unpleasant, rather than liberating, and use various methods to counter the anxiety it produces. One method they rely on is to interpret change as an empowering and even spiritual journey, a search for an authentic self that lies just out of reach. Other methods include the idealisation of a previous time when things were 'simpler,' and the attempt to create order and permanence, no matter how tenuous.

The Twenty-First Century Fluid Society

Theorists have employed many different terms in their attempts to delineate contemporary society from that which came before it. Words such as *post-Fordism*, *neoliberalism* and the almost-antiquated *postmodernism* are used to encompass the intertwined economic, social and cultural conditions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, which exist in different configurations in European and Anglo-American countries, and to distinguish this set of conditions from the previous set, often referred to as *Fordism* or *modernism*. Most recently, the term 'neoliberalism' has become the predominant designation used to describe not only the present-day global economic system but also the social and cultural circumstances that it has engendered (as was discussed in the introduction of this thesis).

Luc Boltanski's book *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2006) is an attempt to distinguish neoliberalism from the capitalism that came before it. The term 'spirit' is a useful metaphor with which to engage with capitalism, as a spirit is usually thought of as non-corporeal and

invisible, yet it has material effects. Building on ideas presented in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), in which Max Weber argued that Protestant valorisation of work encouraged the capitalist practice of working hard to accumulate capital for investment, Boltanski puts forward the idea that neoliberalism can be seen as the third spirit of capitalism. After analysing decades of management literature Boltanski observes that between the 1960s and the 1990s there was a clear movement away from the language of strict vertical hierarchical control and “narrow career paths” towards a new language of horizontal management, networking and flexible working conditions, “offering far more freedom of movement, far more capacity for self-development and self-expression than was available to the ‘company man’ of the mid twentieth century” (Gilbert, 2008, p. 34). The new spirit is one of movement and transition, which “valorises mobility above all” (Boltanski, 2002, p. 11), and which encourages workers to be “as light, as adaptable, as flexible, as in tune with the current demands of the situation as possible” (p. 14). Boltanski delineates this third spirit of capitalism in opposition to the second spirit of capitalism, which he associates with hierarchy, bureaucracy, standardisation and materiality, and which was challenged by Modernist writers and artists, as well as what he refers to as the ‘artistic Left,’ who longed for movement and an authentic humanness, and who strove to disrupt the strict hierarchies of the early to mid-twentieth century.

There are similarities between Boltanski’s language when describing the different ‘spirits’ of capitalism and the language used by Zygmunt Bauman. While the details of Boltanski’s and Bauman’s theories are different, they both focus on explaining the significant differences between what was and what is, and one of the ways they overlap is in their articulation of contemporary neoliberal capitalism as flexible, mobile and fluid, in opposition to the rigidity and staidness of what came before it. Bauman describes this in terms of ‘liquid’ and ‘solid’ modernity. According to Bauman, ‘solid’ modernity relates to the dimension of

space and liquid modernity relates to the dimension of time. Solid modernity relates to fixedness; liquid modernity relates to flow. Bauman explains: “Liquids, unlike solids, cannot easily hold their shape...fluids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it; and so for them it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy” (2000, p. 2). In solid modernity subjects were expected to keep their shape. In liquid modernity, it is the opposite

The Fluid Subject

Twenty-first century theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman, along with others such as Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval have described the fluid subject of neoliberalism in detail. One significant change that has taken place is in the way the subject interacts with their own identities. In Bauman’s terms, whereas under ‘solid’ modernity elements of identity such as sexuality, gender, physical appearance, relationships and even occupation were generally considered as fixed, in liquid modernity it is increasingly accepted that these things are fluid (2000). Of course, this change in the way of thinking about identity can be, and often is, viewed as being positive; the culture of the second spirit of capitalism, or solid modernity, was notoriously intolerant of difference. The image of the production line is often used as a metaphor for solid-modern conditions under which the human subject was produced en masse, often leaving little room for things that are taken for granted under liquid modernity such as exploring one’s sexuality, experimenting with different living arrangements, or trying new careers. Modernist artists, writers and theorists challenged the available subject-positions of the time and sought new, freer, ways of being (Boltanski, 2002). Much of the critique of solid modernity came from the Left, which has a long history of desiring conditions under which the human subject would be able to attain ‘authenticity’ (Boltanski, 2002). It advocated for more choice and more flexibility; two things that have come about with the

advent of neoliberalism. Indeed, “the present-day situation emerged out of the radical melting of the fetters and manacles rightly or wrongly suspected of limiting the individual freedom to choose and to act” (Bauman, 2000, p. 5).

The structures that kept people ‘in their place’ for the better part of the twentieth century have thus been largely dismantled. A multiplicity of identity positions has been legitimated, as have alternative domestic configurations; the nuclear family of mother, father and children has been somewhat displaced and the ‘modern family,’ can take a wide variety of forms, as the American TV show of the same name illustrates. Not only has the workforce become accessible to women as well as men, but many people are able to organise their work to suit them. No longer are people expected to put in forty years of ‘nine to five’ at the same company. This weakening of rigid structures has been beneficial in many ways, just as the Left intended. Yet there is an underside to this revolution in identity. Here in the twenty-first century, ways of being that were seen as progressive or even utopian in the middle of the twentieth century have become the lived experience of the subject of neoliberalism, and this lived experience is far less pleasant than was imagined. Bauman explains: “If the flipside of the ‘solid modern’ domination-through-order-building was the totalitarian tendency, the flipside of the ‘liquid modern’ domination-through-uncertainty is the state of ambient insecurity, anxiety and fear” (Bauman and Haugaard, 2008, p. 112).

The new fluid, or liquid, ‘spirit’ of capitalism, partly came about because of a Leftist critique that sought an end to the rigid structures of Fordism. But by the 1970s problems within capitalism itself also meant that it needed to adapt and to find a new ‘spirit’ (Boltanski, 2002). New technologies and globalisation increased the extent and pace of change, causing capital to break free from the confines of manufacturing and industry and move with few obstructions around the globe (Bauman, 2000). Technological advances of the last few decades, particularly the internet, have enabled capital to move freely from country

to country in ways that the manufacturers and factory owners of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries could never have imagined or anticipated. Now, vast sums of money disappear from one place and manifest instantaneously across the globe at the click of a button. Additionally, neoliberal ideology means that governments are often loath to regulate these movements in capital; on the contrary, the state is expected to facilitate and ease the movement of capital across the globe (Brown, 2005, p. 41). This seemingly anchorless, often unrestricted flow of capital is largely invisible and has the quality of seeming insubstantial, and yet it has substantial real-world effects, not only on economics but on politics, society, culture and the individual.

The subject of liquid modernity has been shaped, at least in part, by this flow of capital and a market that is in constant flux. The subject is a flexible worker, proficient in modifying their skills to whatever new task is offered; malleability and versatility are important qualities of the fluid subject (Bauman, 2000; Boltanski, 2002; Dardot & Laval, 2013). In a quickly changing job market, using quickly advancing technologies, employees must adapt in order to preserve their value. They must even be willing to move to a new city or country to work; the breaking of important social support networks when leaving behind family and friends is viewed as just part of the necessity of building one's career or following job opportunities in neoliberalism. The erosion of workers' rights and upsurge in casual or no-fixed- hours contracts further contribute to neoliberal workers' instability and further perpetuate their need to look for better, or at least new, opportunities either at home or abroad (Brown, 2005; Giroux, 2001). For many neoliberal workers, there is rarely a 'long term' but instead only short term, variation, instability and a series of one-off transactions.

The uncertainty that fluidity produces in the neoliberal subject is often represented by media and advertising campaigns as something to be embraced, as liberating and exciting (Dardot & Laval, 2013) rather than a source of anxiety. The neoliberal subject is told

repeatedly that they can be whoever they want to be and do whatever they want to do (Dardot & Laval, 2013). If their life or career is not what they wish it to be, they can reinvent or, using the management-speak that has entered the popular vernacular, ‘rebrand’ themselves, with new clothing, cosmetics, surgery, gym memberships, subscriptions to ‘lifestyle’ magazines, diet and ‘nutrition’ plans, mindfulness or meditation classes, hobbies, therapy, or seminars in ‘life skills,’ to name just a few examples. In this way, consumerism can be seen as “the acceptance of consumption as the way to self-development, self-realization and self-fulfilment” (Benton, 1987, p. 245), as well as being one of the key methods via which the neoliberal subject enacts their fluidity.

Looking at cultural production, especially writing, it can be seen that “Life in post-Fordism is frequently represented as not very enjoyable” (Nilges, 2008, p. 30). This is definitely true of the representation of neoliberal life in Palahniuk’s novels. All the multiplicity, movement, pluralism and diversity that provides freedom from rigid social structures has resulted in free-floating, isolated subjects who are unable to form deep attachments and who is anxious and unsettled due to the constant flux in their life. Representations of the neoliberal subject frequently portray this subject as desperately yearning for an external authority that will give them a stable identity, or a return to an anchoring, structuring logic that will provide them with their bearings and endow their lives with meaning again, or a sense of permanence, all of which are prominent features of Palahniuk’s work. The Deleuzian flight and escape no longer feel revolutionary, and in a time of few rules and much choice, “the anti-Oedipus has been replaced by the anti-anti-Oedipus” (Nilges, 2008, p. 31). The representations of neoliberal subjectivity in fictional writing indicate that Fordism, or solid modernity, is viewed with a strong feeling of nostalgia (Nilges, 2008, p. 40). It is viewed as a simpler, more stable time, when people had social connections and were certain about their place in the world. It is not the intention of this

chapter to endorse this ‘at least’ argument. Rather, its intention is to argue that Palahniuk’s characters represent the experience of the fluidity of neoliberal subjectivity and have a concomitant nostalgic yearning for security and authenticity. Contrary to much critical discussion of Palahniuk’s work, the fluidity portrayed in his novels is as much an unsettling and confusing aspect of contemporary subjectivity as an exciting way to resist labels and social expectations. An analysis of the novels demonstrates that Palahniuk’s characters seek permanence and certainty in a society that celebrates the transitory. Somewhat paradoxically, frenzied movement is a part of an attempt to find this.

Revolutionary Bodies?

I began this chapter with a refutation of the positive spin that some of Palahniuk’s critics have put on fluidity. Some commentators go further, suggesting that Palahniuk’s fiction represents fluidity as potentially subversive. In particular, the bodily transformations that Shane and Shannon go through in *Invisible Monsters* have been read as representing methods of resistance to oppressive social norms and expectations. For example, Collado-Rodriguez argues that the novel’s “transgression” is “effected by its insistence on (the necessity of) change, performance and hybridity” (2013a, p. 10). He goes on to note that, in the novel, “the body is, like the self, always in a nonstable transition towards new definitions” (2013a, p. 10), which he frames positively. Similarly, Andrew Slade believes Shane’s transformation into Brandy Alexander “gives him a chance to become free from all of those expectations that the family, commanded by the father and enforced by the mother, forces on to all of us” (2013, p. 85). Following these arguments, Shane thwarts society’s expectations of manhood by not only undergoing gender reassignment surgery but undergoing the surgery just because it was “stupid and destructive” (Palahniuk, 1999a, p. 258). His sister Shannon, on the other hand, being beautiful and living within a society that celebrates and even

fetishizes female beauty, commits a transgressive act by shooting her own face off and becoming an ‘invisible monster.’

As has already been explored, one of the key features of liquid capitalism is “the elevation of novelty and degradation of the routine” (Bauman, 2007b, p. 130). Initially, this elevation of novelty appears to be celebrated in *Invisible Monsters* via the character of Brandy Alexander, the ‘transformation Queen’ and Shane’s alter-ego. Indeed, it is easy to see why Brandy has been read as epitomizing the emancipatory potential of personal transformation; many of the descriptions of Brandy seem to celebrate her transition. For example, the various procedures that Brandy undergoes are described in depth throughout the novel. She has labiaplasty and vaginaplasty, not “to mention her scrotal electrolysis” (Palahniuk, 1999a, p. 177). She undergoes a trachea shave, “laser surgery to thin her vocal chords” and has her “scalp advanced three centimetres to give her the right hairline” (p. 177). Brandy also takes many different hormones, including oral estrogens, anti-androgens and progestons, amongst others. She uses different products, clothes and make up to help her enact her new identity; her trademark lipstick is Plumbago. Furthermore, as will be seen, Brandy embraces her changes with the positive attitude that is often seen as the keystone of success in contemporary capitalism. She enthusiastically encourages others to shed their identities, which are presented as oppressive and inauthentic, so that they, too, can recreate themselves. The implication is that their new self will be better and more authentic than their old one, reflecting the promise at the core of the neoliberal injunction to change: that if one changes enough they will finally feel a sense of authenticity.

However, positive readings of *Invisible Monsters* as straightforwardly advocating for change as a method of either resisting social norms or finding an authentic self are complicated by some of Shannon’s descriptions of Brandy. Indeed, it is Brandy’s fundamental lack of authenticity that is often highlighted in the novel. Shannon describes her:

“The skin is a lot of pink around a Plumbago mouth, and the eyes are too aubergine. Even these colours are too garish right now, too saturated, too intense. Lurid. You think of cartoon characters” (p. 117). Brandy is made to appear cartoonish, or even hyper-real; not-quite real and too real at the same time. Shannon also refers to Brandy as a “character” (p. 12), highlighting her inauthenticity. Shane/Brandy strongly resembles the neoliberal subject, who exists in “a kaleidoscope of constant change” within which “there is no centre around which things could condense, solidify and settle” (Bauman, 2007b, p. 122). These subjects experiment with identities, they can be whoever they want to be, yet they don't know who they are. This leaves them anxious and destabilised; instead of feeling liberated by the myriad choices on offer, the neoliberal subject yearns for a sense of authenticity yet cannot find it.

Any reading of Brandy as celebrating change is rendered further problematic when considering that Shane never really wanted to be a woman. Rather, he wanted to transgress against society by committing a significant error. Ng (2009) argues that committing such an error is a way of “resisting cultural interpellation” (p. 24). Yet there is a significant contradiction in the idea that in a liquid capitalist society one can resist interpellation by embracing radical change. If neoliberal subjects are compelled to embrace change and to find it gratifying and exciting, as claimed by Dardot and Laval (2013), then Shane, representing the neoliberal subject, does not commit an error but instead does exactly what he is expected to. Bauman’s statement that “consumerist culture is marked by a constant pressure to be *someone else*” (2007a, p. 100) supports such a reading. Shane, far from demonstrating resistance, has been fully interpellated and is acting in complete accordance with capitalist norms.

Furthermore, Shane spends a significant amount of money in creating his new identity. The many surgical procedures, cosmetics, clothes, accessories, and hormone pills that are required to maintain the Brandy Alexander identity are expensive – Brandy often

resorts to stealing cosmetics and medications because she cannot afford them. The consumption of such products is less evidence that one is ‘resisting interpellation’ than evidence that one is acting exactly as a subject of contemporary capitalism is meant to act. In a consumer society, solutions to perceived life problems are produced, aggressively marketed, and sold. The subject of the consumer society is bombarded with advertising suggesting they will be happier, more authentic and a more complete person if they buy specific products; except, as noted by Bauman (2007a) the need to consume never ends. Shane, like Shannon, may “feel trapped in a demeaning, dehumanizing, consumer culture in which human identity is mostly packaging, and life follows a predetermined course presumed to lead to perfection” (Truffin, 2009, p. 79), but as his way of breaking out of this quandary is more consumption it is evident that he has fallen into the trap of believing that consumption can change his life.

Like Brandy, the subject of neoliberalism interprets both their own identity and the identities of others in terms of what they consume (Goodwin, 1997, p.3). As an extension of this, identity itself is now consumed (Dardot & Laval, 2013; Goodwin, 1997) – sold in the form of products or experiences that delineate a certain identity, bought with the expectation that it will improve the neoliberal subject's life in some way, and then discarded as soon as it seems outdated, not useful anymore or in need of an upgrade. At the same time, there are so many possibilities and identities to try that it is often unclear exactly what the neoliberal subject should choose. According to Bauman, “in our particular liquid-modern society of consumers, what haunts and oppresses most of us is...the profusion – indeed, *excess* – of options. This bane comes coupled with the scarcity of reliable signposts and authoritative guides” (Bauman & Haugaard, 2008, p. 115). Identity itself, like any other product, enters a process by which it is discarded and replaced with a new one that itself will be dispensed with before long. This can be seen in Shane’s treatment of his Brandy Alexander identity.

Interestingly, Shane's final identity is not Brandy Alexander; rather, the novel ends with the suggestion that he will take on another identity, that of his sister; Brandy Alexander will become the model Shannon MacFarland. This is indeed presented as an upgrade, because now he can "go right to the top" of the modelling world, "no local charity benefit runway shit" (p. 294). In paying for new identities and dispensing with old ones, Shane is a quintessential consumer of identity.

Shannon has also been read as emblematic of how transformation can constitute a form of resistance to capitalist norms. Shannon explains that before shooting herself, she thought "this is going to be so exciting. My makeover. Here was my life about to start all over again" (p. 287). Here, she fully subscribes to the narrative that if she only embraces flexibility and transformation her life will become more fulfilling; embodying the spirit of liquid capitalism. Palahniuk makes this explicit when Shannon uses various neoliberal buzzwords to describe what she hopes will be the effect of her 'makeover': "at last I'll be growing again, mutating, adapting, evolving" (p. 287). As described by Dardot and Laval (2013), in contemporary capitalism, words such as 'growing' and 'evolving' are often applied in a way that valorises change and frames it as exciting and positive. Even though constantly transforming and rebranding as a model made Shannon feel anxious, stressed and inauthentic, she cannot stop framing transformation as the solution to her problems. This parallels the way that in liquid capitalism more change is often seen as the solution to a problem. It has been said that the subject of neoliberalism moves swiftly between two extremes, "the anxious experience of a complex world without guarantees and the intoxicating promise of pure potentiality" (Konings, 2014, p. 48). Shannon embodies this vacillation. Rather than being a means of resisting her subjectivity, Shannon's motivation in shooting herself clearly aligns with the imperatives of neoliberalism: to adapt, to makeover, to avoid stagnation and to address a problem through more change. Nor is this the last transformation that Shannon goes

through in the novel; rather, she constantly reinvents herself with the help of her friend Brandy Alexander, hiding her disfigured face with veils and changing names and histories as the situation requires.

This exploration of identity continues in *Survivor*, a novel that was published in the same year as *Invisible Monsters*. Here the idea of transformation is explored via the narrator Tender Branson, who exemplifies the fluidity of the neoliberal subject and the continuous need for rebirth and rebranding. After leaving a religious cult and finding fame as a “celebrated celebrity religious leader” (p. 89), Tender is at first excited about being able to transform, as he is ashamed of himself and his appearance: “I want a personal fitness trainer. I want to lose fifteen pounds. I want my hair to be thicker. I want my nose to look smaller. Capped teeth. A cleft chin. High cheekbones. I want a manicure, and I want a tan” (p. 158). Thus, with some encouragement from his agent who wants to “modify” him to “fit the campaign” (p. 144), Tender transforms from a plain, overweight, shy, cleaner to a sculpted, muscular, attention-seeking superstar.

Like Brandy Alexander, Tender consumes a wide range of sometimes dangerous products in order to achieve this transformation, such as “The Durateston 250. The Mifepristone abortion pills from France. The Plenastril from Switzerland. The Masterone from Portugal...These are the injectables, the tablets, the transdermal patches” (p. 139). He also eats little and works out a lot, overhauls his wardrobe and begins to use make up; all methods of changing one's identity or ‘rebirth’ that are encouraged in neoliberal society, with its celebration of weight loss and makeover success stories. Furthermore, as with Brandy Alexander, most of the methods that Tender must use to improve himself must be bought. He explains that, if you want to be famous, “you say yes to the back-to-back tanning sessions. Electrolysis? Yes. Teeth capping? Yes. Dermabrasion? Yes. Chemical peels?” (p. 149).

Aside from the very real economic cost of his transformation, Tender also finds that it begins to become psychologically taxing and anxiety-inducing. This is because he must constantly change and improve in order to retain, and therefore capitalise on, his followers' attention - just as the neoliberal subject must consistently transform to compete effectively with others in a liquid society. Tender complains about his fans:

They want more than human. They want larger than life size. Nobody wants just anatomically correct.

People want anatomical enhancement. Surgically augmented. New and improved. Silicone-implanted.

Collagen-injected. (p. 136)

For the neoliberal subject it is not enough to achieve an attractive 'after' photo. It is not a matter of reaching a specific standard in one's life and then being able to relax; self-work is continuous because there "are now no standards to keep up to – or rather no standards which, once reached, could authoritatively endorse the right to acceptance and respect and guarantee its long duration" (Bauman, 2007a, p. 131).

For Tender, this uncomfortable aspect of neoliberal subjectivity manifests in not only making more and more changes to his physical appearance, but also the rather absurd situation of having to perform ever greater and more amazing miracles, to be an ever more miraculous healer. Clearly, by having Tender literally work miracles, Palahniuk satirizes the difficulty of achieving lasting success in contemporary liquid society. The subject of contemporary liquid capitalism may not be expected to literally perform miracles, but like Tender their personal success is dependent on their ability to evolve, be made over and be reborn.

The idea that the transformations of physical identity in Palahniuk's work represent a transgression of social norms, or that the changing body or identity is a site of resistance or transgression in the context of contemporary capitalism, are I contend misreadings of both the novels and contemporary capitalism itself – captured by contemporary capitalist rhetoric.

Rather, I would argue Palahniuk renders problematic the commonly held liquid capitalist idea that one will improve one's life if one can just change enough. In *Fight Club*, Palahniuk explores the extent to which products express identity when the narrator famously lists the contents of his apartment in order to show what kind of person he is. Most of the methods by which the characters in Palahniuk's novels alter their identities are products that are marketed, sold and bought, and all of them hold out the promise of something, whether it is authenticity, success, fame or just the assuaging of anxiety.

Like in Palahniuk's novels, in the neoliberal capitalist society people attempt to buy the solution to what ails them. Zygmunt Bauman likens all "shops and service outlets" to pharmacies (Bauman, 2010, p. 69). He explains that "Whatever the other, ostensible uses of the goods on sale, most of the goods are (or at least they are suggested and imagined to be) medicines. Obtaining such goods and consuming them are acts conjectured and hoped to placate discomforts or pains that would otherwise go on seething and festering..." (Bauman, 2010, p. 69). The neoliberal subject's desire to escape their psychological "discomforts or pains" compels them to purchase products and services that promise to transform, and thus 'fix' them. Because of this, there is little transgression in anxious, confused characters who use transformation as a method of fixing themselves or their lives, or even as a method of resisting social norms. In the novels, as in neoliberal society, any political potential of transformation is undermined by its basis in consumption.

From Past to Future

Other than the transformation of physical body or identity, it is the geographical change in Palahniuk's novels that has been read as most significantly transformative for the characters. It is very rare for any of Palahniuk's characters to remain in one place. His novels are often centred around frantic road trips; his characters move around the country, often

shedding their identities and seemingly trying to come to terms with who they think they are. Road trips occur in *Invisible Monsters*, *Lullaby*, *Survivor*, and even in *Damned* and *Doomed*, two later novels that are out of the scope of this thesis. At times, the road trips correspond with the characters' transformations. Consequently, commentators such as Sonia Baelo-Allue (2013) have seen the road trips as representing positive change for the characters, and thus offering a kind of guidance for Palahniuk's readers.

It is easy to see how such readings come about. Both *Invisible Monsters* and *Survivor* describe the road trips in very similar terms; as a metaphorical, and often literal, shedding of the extra baggage that the characters carry with them. Brandy, who is "someone different every week" (1999a, p. 47), exalts in her fluidity, and she encourages her friends to discard their pasts and identities if they are dissatisfied with their lives, referring to her help with this as the "Brandy Alexander Witness Reincarnation Project" (p. 139). After undergoing the trauma of shooting off her face, Shannon travels with Brandy across Canada and the United States as part of the 'Witness Reincarnation Project,' trying on different identities, and making up a new self for everyone she encounters. During this trip, Shannon takes on the identities – the names, costumes and made-up backgrounds – of 'Daisy St. Patience,' 'Miss Kay MacIsaac,' 'Bubba Joan' and 'Miss Arden Scotia,' among others. Their male travelling companion is variously known as 'Alfa Romeo,' 'Chase Manhattan,' 'Nash Rambler,' 'Denver Omelet,' 'Ellis Island,' 'Seth Thomas' and 'Manus Kelley.'

Shannon likens this small group to "desperate refugees from Beverly Hills with seventeen pieces of matched luggage migrating cross-country to start a new life in the Okie Midwest. Everything very elegant and tasteful, one of those epic Joad family vacations, only backwards. Leaving a trail of cast-off accessories, shoes and gloves and chokers and hats..." (p. 180). The journey is seen as an undoing of identity; what is cast off are identity markers. Interestingly, the road trip is described in very similar terms in *Survivor*. In this novel, the

narrator Tender Branson spends his road trip gaining weight and bad skin and losing his tan; undoing the transformation he underwent as a religious celebrity. It can be seen that the road trips in these two novels depict the undoing of layers of socialization, which is presented negatively, and it is easy to see how this has been read as a way for the characters to leave behind their pasts in order to ready themselves for their futures, or, similarly, as a positive movement away from their capitalist subjectivity and towards an ever-elusive authentic self. The common phrases ‘getting rid of baggage,’ ‘moving on,’ ‘leaving one's old self behind’ and ‘letting go of the past’ all describe the process that appears to be occurring for the characters during these road trips. Yet the messages these phrases convey, of discarding aspects of the self that are problematic, and of moving from the past into the future, are all injunctions of fluid contemporary neoliberalism.

In a slightly different reading, which still frames movement positively, Sonia Baelo-Allue (2013) suggests that the nomadism of Brandy Alexander and Shannon in *Invisible Monsters* teaches Shannon to let go and accept liquid life, which is necessary when living in a liquid society. According to Baelo-Allue, the road trip is closely linked to Brandy and her “simple strategy of resilience in which past and present are left behind” (2013, p. 131). The road trip allows Shannon “the possibility of shedding her old identity and putting on a new one” (Baelo-Allue, 2013, p. 134). It is “her chance to leave solid identity and its traps for a liquid, fluid sense of self” (Baelo-Allue, 2013, p. 134). Baelo-Allue argues that by the end of novel Shannon has been able to come to the powerful understanding that she is the author of her own story.

There are several issues with reading the road-trip in *Invisible Monsters*, and in Palahniuk’s other novels, as representing the breaking free from solid identity the creation of a new, liquid self as a positive step towards self-fulfilment. First and foremost, this reading ignores Bauman and Boltanski’s critiques, which frame liquid life as typical of neoliberal

capitalism – problematic and anxiety-inducing rather than positive. Furthermore, if one reads the societies of Palahniuk's novels as resembling our own liquid neoliberal society, then the characters never possessed a solid identity to break free from in the first place. Fluidity, and the mobilisation and deployment of a wide and constantly-changing range of skills and talents, is the order of neoliberalism (Bauman, 2000). Like the individual born into neoliberalism who has only known fluidity rather than solidity, the characters in the novels exist only in a liquid world, moving from identity to identity without ever having experienced solidity. Thus, a more accurate and relevant perspective is that, rather than symbolising a breaking free of an oppressive solid subject-position, the road trips in Palahniuk's novels are very much representative of neoliberal subjectivity itself; not resistance but more of the same – where fluidity is the object of consumption and a subject is obliged to adopt the stance that fluidity is an exciting and positive part of life.

In the novels, the road trip is linked to the act of 'becoming the author of one's own story'; both are seen as ways of exorcising the past and assertively moving into the future. Often, Palahniuk's novels have one character who encourages the others to tell and then re-write their stories. In *Invisible Monsters*, Brandy Alexander is this character. She tells Shannon: "who you are moment to moment...is just a story" (p. 173) and "When you realise the story you're telling is just words, when you can crumble it up and throw your past in the trash can...then we will figure out who you're going to be" (p. 61). Following this rationale, Manus/Seth, one of Brandy's acolytes, decides to throw away all the family heirlooms in his possession. He "chucks" his baptism candle, bronze baby shoes, christening gown and even his birth certificate, these symbols of who he really is, "out of existence" (p. 215), after which Brandy says to him: "Listen, I don't want to know who you are, but if you could be anybody, who would you be?" (p. 215).

As with the road trips, the message conveyed by Brandy here can be, and has been, read as a liberating one: that you are not a prisoner of your past, and that you can reinvent yourself as whoever you like. Yet rejection of one's past, reinvention of oneself and consumption of identity, all key elements of the Brandy Alexander narrative, are also all key elements of the fluid neoliberal subject. Moreover, *Invisible Monsters* as a whole does not appear to endorse Brandy's view, or at least does not view this reinvention of the self as straightforwardly positive; at the end of the novel both Shane/Brandy and Shannon are still working at reinventing themselves – rewriting their stories – implying that this is work that never ends, work that may be arduous rather than enjoyable.

The idea that you can leave your story behind by narrating it is also very much part of contemporary self-help culture, which encourages full disclosure to exorcise the past and move more successfully into the future. This link to contemporary self-help narration is reflected in *Survivor*, when Fertility tells Tender: “You'll find a way to leave your whole screwed-up life story behind” (p. 6), and “after you can tell your life story and walk away from it...after that we'll start a new life together and live happily ever after” (p. 6). Not only do Fertility's words represent the general premise of much of the self-help industry, but the promise of an unknown but vague and better future is reflective of neoliberalism's promises of a better life, that are always held out and simultaneously withheld, forcing the subject to be fluid to try to attain it. In *Invisible Monsters*, Brandy tells Shannon, “It's not everybody who gets a second chance to be born and raised again a second time” (p. 177). However, in contemporary liquid capitalism, people are encouraged to erase and raise themselves, again and again.

Even Brandy Alexander is clearly not certain whether transforming herself will bring her the personal power and freedom she professes it will. Despite claiming that she undertook her gender transition in order to challenge and break free of social expectations, she wonders

“what if there was someone, just one person who would love her, who could make her life happy, just the way she was, without the hormones and make-up and the clothes and shoes and surgery?” (p. 181). This suggests that Brandy is isolated in her life of constant change and yearns for more security and connection in the form of a stable relationship with ‘one’ significant other – hardly the stuff of flux and transformation. Brandy is the consummate neoliberal subject not only in her fluidity but in her yearning for security and underlying belief in authenticity.

Similarly, towards the end of the novel Brandy’s acolyte, Shannon, declares: “Fuck me. I’m so tired of being me. Me beautiful. Me ugly. Blonde. Brunette. A million fucking fashion makeovers that only leave me trapped being me” (p. 224). Since Shannon exists in a liquid society, the ‘me’ that she refers to should not be read as a kind of foundational, authentic identity, but rather the ‘me’ of neoliberal subjectivity; the liquid self who cannot escape the uncomfortable imperative to change. She has discovered that no matter the identity she takes on, the instability and confusion she feels does not go away. Whoever she is, whether model or monster, she must continue changing. Similarly, the neoliberal subject, compelled to ‘evolve,’ ‘grow’ and ‘rebrand’ in order to succeed in their fluid society, finds that this fluidity brings them not the promised excitement but insecurity and instability.

Neoliberalism is the era of the rebirth, of rebranding, of change. The portrayal of characters shedding their identities on road trips and then writing new stories for themselves may initially appear to affirm the idea that it is liberating to shed old identities and create new ones. However, a better reading of these features of the novels is that the actions of these characters reveal the imperatives of a liquid society.

A Journey of Self Discovery

As has already been touched upon, fluidity in Palahniuk's novels has been seen by some commentators (Simmons and Allen, 2009; Slade, 2009) as a way for the characters to come to an understanding of their authentic self. They argue that this authentic self has been overwhelmed by the demands of the mediated world and the expectations of the characters' societies, which, like ours, casts all people into narrow roles. For example, in Andrew Slade's reading of *Invisible Monsters*, the fluidity of the characters' identities, and especially the changes they perpetrate on their bodies via surgery and self-mutilation, is the result "of a search for modes of authentic living in a world where the difference between the fake and the genuine has ceased to function" (Slade, 2009, p. 62). Similarly, commentators such as Rubin (2012) suggest that Palahniuk's characters "articulate the importance of...trying to live an authentic life" (Rubin, 2012, p. 140). As has been mentioned in previous sections of this chapter, my argument concurs with the reading that the characters are in search of authentic selves, though it is an authentic self that lies somewhere underneath the identities that the characters fluidly consume, rather than an authentic self that has been obscured up by solid social roles, that the characters are seeking. Furthermore, while the existence of an authentic self remains open to debate, it is likely an impossibility that the liquid subject of contemporary capitalism will ever find it.

It will be useful to look further at the concept of authenticity itself, seeing as it is closely related to both the road trip and the self-help narration of one's life, and so often employed in analyses of Palahniuk's novels. Luc Boltanski links the idea of authenticity to the Left and its desire for revolution. He explains that revolution "consists in identifying and revealing that which, at the heart of social relations, impedes the full realisation of humanity in order to radically transform social conditions so as to allow for the appearance of a new, wholly human person" (Boltanski, 2002, p. 3). Because the Left sees the human being as

made, not born (Boltanski, 2002), it traditionally imagines that the right combination of social and cultural conditions will allow for a kind of human that has a deep understanding of their true selves and is able to act out these truths. This idea is reflected in the work of Marxist theorists such as Herbert Marcuse, whose work has been discussed elsewhere in this thesis. Many commentators have read Palahniuk's novels as presenting the idea that the authentic self exists but has been obscured by capitalist conditions. These readings see the characters' fluidity as either inauthentic and a cover for a deeper truth, or part of a process that will eventually lead them to unlock their authentic selves. On the other hand, it is possible to see the very focus on and engagement with the concept of authenticity in Palahniuk's novels as peculiarly neoliberal.

For Martijn Konings, the strong belief in “a core self, something inside of her/him that has the truth about her/him yet has proved elusive” (2014, p. 43), is part of neoliberal subjectivity. Konings puts forward the idea that in neoliberal society money can be viewed as an ‘icon’ that “elicits hopeful anticipation” as well as “anxiety and resentment” (2014, p. 43). Viewing our current self as inauthentic or merely a place holder for the future authentic self, we hope that by acting the right way we will one day be able to access the promise of the icon in order to live the authentic 'good life'. The icon and the potential it unlocks will allow us to “assemble an identity that is more authentic than the one we already have” (p. 43). Inevitably, we are unable to secure a feeling of authenticity, which has the effect of producing further anxiety. However, rather than disrupting our faith in the power of the icon to enrich our lives, this anxiety actually causes us to redouble our efforts to unlock the potential offered by the icon, thus reaffirming our commitment to it. At the same time, all past and present versions of the self are viewed as inauthentic, mere precursors to the authentic future self. It can be seen, then, that fluidity and the consumption of different

identities are not only fundamental to unlocking the promise of success in contemporary capitalism but have a secondary purpose; that of holding out the promise of authenticity.

In many ways, it seems that the characters in Palahniuk's novels represent the neoliberal subject's search for authenticity, in all its shades. That is, while at first characters such as Shannon and Tender embrace change in the hope that the newest identity they take on will finally make them feel authentic, they are quickly left bewildered and exhausted by their fluidity, not to mention their wild cross-country road trips. Indeed, while Shannon initially feels liberated and excited by her new, fluid life, seeing it as a way to escape her old life and identity and find a new, better self, she soon admits that fluidity can be difficult: "Sometimes, twice in one day, you have to live up to a new identity. A new name. New relationships. Handicaps. It's hard to remember who I started this road trip being" (1999a, p. 64). This sentiment is echoed by Tender Branson, who says: "I wonder if running is just another fix to a fix to a fix to a fix to a problem I can't remember" (1999b, p. 58) In the latter parts of *Invisible Monsters*, Shannon declares: "All these thousands of miles later, all these different people I've been, and it's still the same story...How is it you can keep mutating and still be the same deadly virus?" (1999a, p. 121); a question that finds a counterpart in a repeated refrain from *Choke*: "Even after all that rushing around, where we've ended up is the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night" (2001, p. 293).

The characters in Palahniuk's novels believe that they can find a sense of authenticity if only they can successfully shed their old selves and find the right new one, after all, they represent neoliberal subjects who yearn for authenticity and think it will arrive with the next identity they try on. Yet it is unsurprising that by the end of the novels, Palahniuk's characters don't find new, authentic selves; what they find is that they cannot escape the search for an authentic self.

Blazer (2012) comes to a similar conclusion. She argues that it is impossible for the “postmodern” subject to achieve authenticity, because they do not know how to be authentic and have doubts as to whether an authentic self even exists. The ending of *Choke*, in which the narrator, Victor, declares hopefully: “Where we're standing right now, in the ruins in the dark, what we build could be anything” (Palahniuk, 2001, p. 293) can be read as indicating a new, brighter beginning for the characters in this novel. Indeed, it has been argued that, while reading *Choke*, “the reader sees, and expels, each of Victor's personas – con artist, sex addict, martyr, Jesus, criminal, outcast – until all that is left at the end is Victor” (Kavadlo, 2013, p. 155). Yet Alex Blazer refers to the ending of the novel as a “sentimental sham” (2009, p. 155). Similarly, Cowart (2013) argues that “the reader [of *Choke*] must not fall for the invitation to go looking for some authentic, bedrock identity, the key to poor Victor's recovering his psychological and emotional health” (p. 163).

Despite arriving at the conclusion via different frameworks, these latter critiques of *Choke*'s ending are very similar to what is proposed in this chapter. That is, that many of Palahniuk's characters search for an authentic self, amongst all the change and fluidity in their lives, but it cannot be said that they ever definitively find it. Rather than representing the escape from neoliberal subjectivity or the attainment of authenticity, Palahniuk's characters are locked into a chase of an authentic self that doesn't exist.

The Longing for Solidity

Aside from mobilising their fluidity into a search for their authentic self, the neoliberal subject copes with their insecurity and instability by trying to create a sense of solidity and permanence in their lives. Similarly, there are many instances in Palahniuk's novels in which the insecure, unstable characters search for something outside their ever-changing selves to which they can anchor themselves. In this way, Palahniuk's work

conforms to the ideas of Nilges (2008), who explains that current cultural production suggests that a nostalgic “‘at least’ argument now dominates the way we view Fordism” (p. 40). In other words, contemporary cultural representations of Fordism often idealise it, depicting it as a time that offered things that have since been lost to us, namely security, certainty and stability, while simultaneously overlooking the negative aspects of it.

The nostalgic turn towards Fordism can be explained, in part, by the fact that the lived experience of liquid modernity is often unpleasant (Nilges, 2008). It not only consists of the freedom to choose one's own path life, but disorientation, instability and anxiety. These negative factors lead the subject of liquid capitalism to yearn for stable structures to give them a stable identity and their place in the world, just as it leads the fluid characters of Palahniuk's novels to seek solidity and permanency in societies that, like contemporary neoliberalism, celebrate constant change and expect constant reinvention.

Perhaps the novel in which the tension between liquid and solid is shown most explicitly is *Survivor*. The narrator and main character of *Survivor*, Tender Branson, was raised in a solid society under the Creedish Church. Within the Creedish Church, everyone had their place, and no one had to think about what their role in life would be, to the extent that a person's first name indicated what their role in that society was, rather like the way surnames used to denote a person's trade centuries ago. First born sons were called Adam, all other sons were called Tender. All daughters were called Biddy. Adams married Biddys, and when a child was born the parents both became Author. Elderly people were called Elder. Tender explains: “In Creedish culture, your name told everybody just where you belonged. Tender or Biddy. Adam or Author. Or Elder. Your name told you just how your life would go” (p. 240). For Tenders, life meant being labour missionaries in the outside world and sending their wages back to the Creedish Church. Usually, the Tenders adhere to the strict rules of the Church when they are on the outside, living unchanging, predictable lives that

have been pre-planned for them. According to Tender, Tenders “didn't dream” (p. 239), though he doesn't indicate that he thinks this is a negative thing. However, Tender finds himself compelled to become a member of a liquid society when, due to mass suicide, he becomes the last Creedish and the authority of the Church in his life diminishes.

Finding himself pushed into a fluid existence, Tender enters a frenzy of self-improvement. He describes the process of leaving the Creedish and becoming a fluid subject: “Minute by minute I'm moving away from salvation and into the future” (p. 166). Yet his transformation is portrayed as distinctly unenjoyable, and Tender's descriptions of the society outside the Creedish Church frequently portray it as outrageously devoid of meaning. Describing a cemetery in which the dead, instead of being buried in the earth, are kept in vast crypts, Tender says: “in the eighties wing, there's no Jesus, just the same secular green polished marble and brass you'd find in a department store” (p. 244). The stable signposts of Tender's younger life have been replaced by the laws of consumerism and the market, which govern the liquid society that he is now part of. The laws of consumerism and the valorisation of change order the lives of the characters who Tender observes. Referring to his therapist, Tender says: “Larry, Barry, Jerry, Terry, Gary, all her lost boyfriends run together” (p. 226). As with Denny from *Choke*, Tender's therapist can only form transient relationships. This attitude to relationships begins to affect Tender himself as the solid bonds of the Church weaken their hold over him. Obsessed with Fertility Hollis, he fantasizes about how to make her “his,” however, part of this fantasy is about having the option to “Throw her away, maybe” (p. 210). In a society that celebrates change, old relationships, like old identities, are easily discarded for the new.

The sentimental way in which Tender views the Church places its way of life as a counterpart of the anxiety-producing fluid life. Tender says: “People are always so disappointed if I tell them the truth, that none of us lived in oppressed turmoil. None of us

resented the church. We just lived” (p. 274). Tender has been released into a fluid society with few signposts, except those of the market. Yet Tender is still controlled and compelled to act in certain ways, just as much as when he was in the Church. He complains: “Everything we did to fix me had side effects we had to fix. Then the fixes had side effects to fix and so on and so on” (p. 134). Instead of being subject to the injunctions of the Creedish Church, he is subject to the injunctions of the liquid society and finds that his new life is “less freedom and more of a schedule of decisions and task after task after task. The feeling isn’t so great but it’s familiar” (p. 159).

Lest Tender’s positive descriptions of the Creedish Church and his complaints about liquid life provoke nostalgia for solid society in the reader, however, Palahniuk provides the revelation towards the end of the novel (the pages are numbered backwards) that Tender only remembers an idealised view of life in the Church. His brother Adam reminds him: “There were no black Creedish. The Creedish elders were a pack of racist, sexist white slavers” (p. 41). Just as it has become common for the subject of neoliberal society to look back at Fordism with a sentimental lens that omits harsh parts of Fordist reality, Tender, in his yearning for stability, overlooks the negative aspects of the Creedish Church. He admits “As rough as being me can feel, what with the drugs and schedule and zero personal integrity, it feels better than me cleaning toilets over and over” (p. 87). Here, the novel demonstrates metaphorically that although it is tempting to view Fordism through a nostalgic lens, finding a way to ameliorate the fluidity of neoliberal society is not a simple matter of going back to an idealised solid past.

Other characters in Palahniuk’s novels attempt to create a sense of solidity in their lives through different methods. One character who particularly demonstrates the yearning for solidity is Denny of *Choke*. A good example of a failed subject of fluid capitalism, Denny is unable to maximise his potential and lacks the resources of Brandy, Shannon, or Tender to

cultivate a new identity for himself. His situation thus epitomises what happens to subjects of liquid capitalism who are unable to transform themselves yet must still somehow survive in the liquid world that sweeps them along. Denny works at Colonial Dunsboro, acting as a servant, though it is clear he is failing at even this minimum wage job. The first time the reader encounters Denny, he is in the Colonial Dunsboro stocks, his wig has fallen off into the mud, and tourists are laughing at him (2001, p. 25). By the end of the novel, he has been ‘banished’ from Colonial Dunsboro, which is the Dunsboro equivalent of having one’s employment terminated.

Denny’s physical description, provided by his friend, Victor, further reinforces that he is a failure: “Over the jeans and belt, you can see the dead elastic waistband of his bad underpants. Orange rust stains show on the loose elastic. In front, a few coiled hairs poke out. There’s yellowy sweat stains on, for real, his underarm skin” (2001, p. 82). Even Denny’s parents have rejected him, having first placed a pointed advertisement in the newspaper: “Free to a good home, twenty-three-year-old male, recovering self-abuser, limited income and social skills, house trained” (2001, p. 122). Denny needs a transformation if he is to succeed in his society, but he completely lacks any assets that he can utilise to effect the necessary change. This may be why his liquid life manifests mainly in pretending to be Victor (2001, p. 85) and in his use of a succession of sexual partners; Denny is a sex addict who is trying, and initially failing, to reform.

Interestingly, for the first part of the novel the only thing that stops Denny pursuing his addiction to sex is being locked in Colonial Dunsboro’s stocks. Being locked immobile in the stocks of a replica solid society is a barrier to Denny enacting his liquid life, and subsequently he can “put together four weeks of sobriety” (2001, p. 72). It is also while he is locked in the stocks that Denny reflects on some of his issues and it becomes clear that Denny lacks solid signposts and guidance. He explains: “It’s okay if there isn’t a God

anymore, but I still want to respect something. I don't want to be the centre of my own universe" (2001, p. 74).

Part way through *Choke*, Denny begins to collect rocks, eventually accumulating a "whole house" of rocks, having "got a rock for every day of his sobriety...It's what he does at night to stay occupied. Find rocks. Wash them. Haul them home" (2001, p. 140). Yet, for Denny, collecting the rocks is not just about occupying time so that he doesn't pursue his addiction. His explanation of why he collects them makes it clear that these rocks symbolise permanence and stability to him, and their presence gives him security in a fluid society in which instability rules and that has expectations of him he cannot fulfil. Rocks are not just rocks to Denny. He explains: "rocks are like, you know, *land*" (2001, p. 141). Rocks represent land and land ownership; an anchoring in the realm of the physical, solid space as a counter to the flow of a liquid society. Denny goes on to say: "What I think happened is when God wanted to make the earth out of chaos, the first thing he did was get a lot of rocks together" (2001, p. 141). In the ever-changing chaos of his life, Denny hopes the rocks will grant him a feeling of order and solidity. Indeed, the novel ends with Denny, Victor and their girlfriends building with the rocks, "struggl[ing] to just put one rock on top of another" (2001, p. 292), in what can be read as a metaphor for the attempt to create a point of stability in a liquid world.

Denny's actions can also be illuminated by the ideas of Bauman (2000), who associated solid modernity with space and liquid modernity with time. Bauman writes that "liquids, unlike solids, cannot easily hold their shape" (p. 2), which is why they relate to time, but states that "solids cancel time" (p. 2). Following this, Denny's rocks and his attempt to build a new space for himself are a clear effort to counter, or even cancel, the changeable, flexible and unstable qualities of his experience.

Another notable example of a character trying to find a sense of solidity in an uncertain, liquid world, is that of Streator, the narrator of *Lullaby*. Streator lives in a world that is inundated by the contradictory imperatives of the media and advertising, which deliver constantly changing messages about what to do or buy in order to improve oneself. Like the other characters mentioned in this chapter, Streator, a journalist, must always surpass his previous efforts in order to ensure the continuance of his success. He must find ever more sensational stories to report on in order to guarantee his career; as with the neoliberal subject described by Bauman, Streator's success is "never earned in full" but must instead be proven again and again (Bauman & Haugaard, 2008, p. 118). Further destabilising Streator, and compounding his feeling of insecurity, he has had a recent experience with the precariousness of life itself. Streator's wife and child have died suddenly. Yet, like Denny, Streator has developed a method to deal with the uncertainty of his liquid life; he has taken up a hobby; making tiny model houses.

Streator carefully explains the delicate work that goes into building a tiny house: "I fit a window frame into a brick wall. With a little brush, the size for fingernail polish, I glue it. The window is the size of a fingernail..." (p. 18). As he so often does, Palahniuk writes (or more precisely the character speaks) in the second person for some of this description, involving the reader in the process, from an examination of the "pattern of the bricks on the wall is as fine as your fingerprint" (p. 18) to the construction of the house and garden: "You hang the tiny gutters. Every detail exact. You set the tiny dormers. Hang the shutters. Frame the porch. Seed the lawn. Plant the trees" (p. 20).

Through Streator's explanation, the reader begins to understand why a hobby might be helpful both to the subject of a liquid world and to grieving families. Streator narrates: "With my chin tucked down tight against the knot of my tie, I tweezer a tiny pane of glass into each window. Using a razor blade, I cut plastic curtains smaller than a postage stamp,

blue curtains for the upstairs, yellow for the downstairs” (p. 19). He explains that you can “lose yourself in each complication” (p. 21). The act of ‘losing yourself’ describes a state of concentration in which you forget everything else but what you are focused on, a way to forget anxiety and other negative feelings. You also ‘lose yourself’ when you are anchored in a present task, not thinking about the future or the past. For the subject of liquid capitalism, the ability to ‘lose oneself’ in a task provides relief from the relentless change, even briefly. It is a way to cope with the world. This can be understood even better when considering Bauman’s assertion that liquid modernity is the realm of time. Building the houses takes such intense focus that it places the individual entirely in the present. It has the effect of freezing time.

Aside from it allowing him to freeze time, there is another reason Streater has taken on this particular hobby. When he finishes building each tiny house, he stands back to admire it: “From this far away it looks perfect. Perfect and safe and happy. A neat red-brick home. The tiny windows of light shine out on the lawn and trees. The curtains glow...” (p. 21). On one level, the house represents what Streater has lost – his family. However, it also represents a fictional idyll that is impossible to achieve in a liquid world, an idyll that has more of a relationship with Fordism, or at least with the ‘nostalgic’ way that is viewed, than with liquid capitalism. The house is “perfect and safe and happy,” it represents security and stability for its occupants, but in a liquid world security and stability have all but disappeared. As Streater stands back and admires his work, he ponders that “this is how we must look to god” (p. 21). Then, in a remarkable passage, he continues: “Now take off your shoe, and with your bare foot, stomp. Stomp and keep stomping. No matter how much it hurts, the brittle broken plastic and wood and glass, keep stomping until the downstairs neighbor pounds on the ceiling with his fist” (p. 22).

Streator stomps on each house he builds until he destroys it. Each time he does this, Streator performs what Sondergard (2009) has called a “symbolic act of control and transgression” (p. 13). He gains control over this tiny environment, makes himself into its ersatz god, and then abruptly and violently destroys his own creation. In creating the houses, Streator is able to “cobble things together. Make order out of chaos” (Palahniuk, 2002, p. 20). The liquid world that Streator inhabits allows for little order, security or control, so making the houses is the only way Streator can generate these things in his life. He becomes his own higher authority in a world that appears to have no authority but the market laws that demand flexibility and change. Yet in destroying the houses, he expresses his anger and frustration with the fact that the world he is subject to is unpredictable, ever-changing and impermanent. Palahniuk’s readers can understand Streator, and “identify with the anger, frustration and confusion of living in a culture where the old rules have broken down, where individuals must make their way with significantly fewer and progressively more hollow cues and guideposts” (Kahn & Rubin, 2009, p. 3).

Whether they look back with nostalgia at a solid society like *Tender*, try to integrate some solidity into their lives like Denny, or try to freeze time like Streator, the novels contain many characters who attempt to ‘create order out of chaos,’ and who long for more security and permanence amongst the speed and change of their liquid societies.

Conclusion

While Shannon, Shane/Brandy and Seth/Manus are on their road trip, stripping themselves of their pasts and experimenting with new identities, they visit the Seattle Space Needle, which built for the 1962 Seattle World’s Fair – a time when the Left-led critique of modernism saw the possibility of liquidity as revolutionary. For Seth, the Space Needle represents all the promise of postmodernity that never transpired: “This was everything we

should've inherited: the whole man on the moon within this decade – asbestos as our miracle friend – nuclear-powered and fossil-fueled world of the Space Age” (p. 98). The Space Needle represents “hope and science and research and glamour left here in ruins” (p. 98). According to Seth, “The folks who go to the Space Needle now...they’re walking around the ruins of the future the way barbarians did when they found Grecian ruins and told themselves that God must’ve built them” (p. 99). On the observation deck of the Space Needle, Brandy gives Shannon and Seth postcards and tells them to “Save the world with some advice from the future” (p. 103). The characters write on their postcards before dropping them over the observation deck to modernity. Seth’s postcard reads “*you have to keep recycling yourself*” (p. 104); a warning to the 1960s from the turn of the twenty-first century of how even fluidity and movement can become oppressive and stifling under the right circumstances.

In contemporary neoliberal society, “time flows, but no longer marches on. There is constant change, but no finishing point; a sequence of incessant new beginnings” (Bauman, 2007b, p. 121). Rather than being expected to occupy rigid subject positions, the neoliberal subject is forced to navigate a space of instability and change. The anxiety this engenders leads them to a belief in and search for stability; if only they buy and do the right things, they might finally find themselves. The ability to change their identity again and again, as if they are changing costume does not help them find this longed-for solidity. Instead, it imbues the neoliberal subject with the unsettling feeling of being a mask with no face behind it.

Palahniuk’s novels describe characters who have similar responses to their predicament as the subject of contemporary liquid capitalism. While on the surface they enthusiastically adopt new identities, these characters feel insecure and unstable, and search for ways to regain a feeling of order and stability. Underlying their transformations is the hope that one day they might find an authentic, solid identity. Paradoxically, this means they

are unable to stop viewing more change, whether it be in the consumption of more identity-products or the disposal of old relationships, as the remedy for what ails them.

The arguments that represent the fluidity in Palahniuk's work as being a source of resistance are based on the premise that the social norms shaped by contemporary capitalism cast people into narrow roles and expect them to conform to these roles, leaving them with little choice or volition in their own lives. These roles are enforced, socially, by the family structure and community in general. It follows, then, that one way to challenge society, or 'transgress,' is to deliberately break out of the role that one has been assigned. Yet reading contemporary capitalism in this way overlooks that it is fluidity, rather than solidity, which is a key feature of neoliberalism, and that under neoliberalism previously solid social expectations and predetermined life courses have broken down and been replaced by the injunction to 'be flexible.' Far from having little choice, the neoliberal subject is faced with almost limitless choice in terms of identity and consumption, and in a world in which identity is thoroughly commodified transformation is no longer transgressive.

Transforming the Field of Possibility: The role of Palahniuk's fiction in the search for positive freedom

Outside the mainstream, people are engaged in constant small experiments, testing new social models, new hierarchies, new personal identities. The most successful of those experiments – what begins as cults, fads, crazes, or manias – the ones that serve people best grow to become the next mainstream. (Palahniuk, 2008b, p. 8).

Across his many novels, Palahniuk has shown a consistent interest in both how fiction can convey the complexity of the lived-world, and the idea that new ways of being can start on the fringe of society and become mainstream. These themes are so predominant that it has been remarked that Palahniuk's novels can be seen a single “polyphonic, asynchronous, temporally bi-directional, hyper-textual and cyber-encyclopedic novel” (Mendieta, 2005, p. 395); a single, ongoing project of trying to understand the neoliberal subject and their society, as well as a continuous attempt to conduct ‘small experiments’ through fiction and to try to imagine different ways of being.

It is a view widely shared amongst Palahniuk's commentators that some of his ‘experiments’ point towards avenues of possible escape for the capitalist subject – for example his fiction is often seen as signalling how society can be re-imagined as a more collective endeavour. Depictions of community in Palahniuk's work have been variously read as illustrating the necessity of love (Aparicio, 2013, p. 214; Kavadlo, 2005, p. 22), or as delineating a new kind of subject who is “capable of collective identification and hence elemental in the reconstruction of a radical, liberatory, anticapitalist politics” (Jordan, 2002, p. 368). Others posit that the novels convey the need for “human significance and interdependency” (Simmons and Allen, 2012, p. 127), “feelings and personal communion with other people” (Collado-Rodriguez, 2013a, p. 12) and empathy (Parker, 2009, p. 79).

Palahniuk's fiction has been read as delivering the message that family and relationships, whatever unconventional form they take, are "indispensable" (Mendieta, 2005, p. 404).

This chapter builds on my previous discussion of the possibility that Palahniuk's work outlines ways for the individual living under contemporary capitalism to enact their escape. In chapter five, I investigated that idea that fluidity can stand as a counter to neoliberal capitalist subjectivity. Here, a related idea is interrogated – that Palahniuk's communities and relationships can challenge neoliberal subjectivities. In this chapter, Palahniuk's communities will be read against Erich Fromm's discussion, in *Fear of Freedom* (1942), of how the capitalist subject reacts to the freedom and insecurity of capitalism.

My main contention in this chapter is *not* that there is no real resistance to capitalism in Palahniuk's work but that this resistance is not delineated in the actions of his characters. In fact, I argue none of his characters are able to definitively break free from their position in their society. Rather, there are two ways (to do mainly with form and *not* content) in which Palahniuk's writing goes some way to challenge capitalism, doing what Brecht describes as "encourag[ing] those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself" (Brecht, 1949/2006, p. 190).

Firstly, I argue, the novels encourage the reader to feel the tragedy of death in such intensity that their reaction has the potential to break through/disrupt the instrumentality of capitalist life. That is, he builds images of death and decay into his novels that disabuse the reader of the illusion that capitalism is inevitable, and that understanding this is urgent. Secondly, the novels deny the reader the comfort of resolved endings. Instead, the ambiguity of Palahniuk's open-endings gives the reader the chance to not only see the inconsistencies of their society, but participate in the imagining of real solutions.

Escaping Freedom

Some of Erich Fromm's ideas have already been discussed in this thesis. In particular, it is Fromm's delineation of the difference between 'freedom from' and freedom to,' discussed in chapter two, that will become important again in this final chapter. Therefore, it will be useful to reiterate some of the key points of Fromm's theory. In brief, Fromm posited that by the twentieth century the capitalist individual had gained 'freedom from' many of the old forms of power that used to control them. Capitalism had broken the last vestiges of feudalism, religion was in decline and each individual was expected to make their way alone in the modern capitalist world. Yet this positive advancement had an underside; the individual, stripped from the web of hierarchical familial and community relationships, or what Fromm calls 'primary bonds,' feels insecure, frightened and alone. Without 'the 'freedom to' develop real individuality, which is difficult to achieve in a society in which the human subject is shaped by capitalist norms, the individual comes to desire an escape from their terrifying freedom. In his book *The Fear of Freedom* (1942), Fromm discusses the various ways an individual can escape this freedom.

Firstly, Fromm believes that in order to escape 'negative freedom,' the individual will attempt to cultivate 'secondary bonds' (1942/2001, p. 122). The cultivation of secondary bonds allows the individual to relinquish the lonely and frightening task of being entirely responsible for themselves, and to "fuse one's self with somebody or something outside oneself in order to acquire the strength which the individual self is lacking" (1942, p. 122). In seeking to give up the "burden" of "the self" (p. 130), Fromm posits individuals are often driven towards dysfunctional, dependent and conflict-laden relationships with other people, which allow them to forget themselves and their discomfiting freedom; Fromm refers to this dynamic as "symbiosis" (p. 136). Similarly, Fromm argues that many people seek out

someone who will protect and take responsibility for them, terming this the “magic helper” (p. 150). Fromm explains: “For some reason or other – often supported by sexual desires – a certain other person assumes for him [sic] those magic qualities, and he makes that person into the being to whom and on whom his whole life becomes related and dependent” (p. 150). As will be seen, Palahniuk’s novels are full of female-presenting characters who play the role of ‘magic helper,’ including *Fight Club*’s Marla, *Survivor*’s Fertility Hollis, *Invisible Monsters*’ Brandy Alexander and *Choke*’s Dr. Paige Marshall, among others.

Secondary bonds can be cultivated in other ways too; one can come to depend on any power that allows one to “become a part of a bigger and more powerful whole outside of oneself... This power can be a person, an institution, God, the nation...” (1942/2001, p. 133). Becoming part of a greater whole allows the individual to give up their responsibilities and the necessity to make their own decisions about their life. The individual essentially relinquishes their freedom, but in return receives a new security and a new pride in the participation in the power in which one submerges” (p. 134). This is one of the most important parts of Fromm’s work, because in it he attempts to explain what had driven so many people to fascism at the time he was writing in the early 1940s. While Fromm acknowledges that many factors contributed to the rise of fascism, he argues that one particularly important factor is the desire of the capitalist subject to be a dependent part of a significant whole, rather than to be independent and alone. Subscribing to fascism involves submission to a higher authority and, ultimately, self-abnegation. In this process, the subject is able to escape their uncomfortable negative freedom and, through paying the price of giving up their self, retreat into a secure world of certainty and order. In other words, although the fascist has to “surrender of individuality and the integrity of the self” (p. 121) they are “united with millions” (p. 131). After taking this into consideration, many of Palahniuk’s apparently liberatory communities appear to be places where the characters can

overcome their fears of being alone and taking responsibility by subsuming themselves in a greater whole and, most notably, *Fight Club* even has a quasi-fascist movement. This will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter.

The final mechanism of escape that will be discussed here is to fully embrace capitalist rationality, give over the struggle to maintain the individual self, and become an ‘automaton,’ “identical with millions of other automatons around him, [who] need not feel alone and anxious anymore” (Fromm, 1942/2001, p. 159). According to Fromm, this is the most common way of escaping freedom in a capitalist society. In becoming an automaton, the individual unquestioningly and completely adopts the proffered capitalist rationality, and “therefore becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect him to be” (p. 159). He points out that many people are “mistaken in taking as “their” decision what in effect is submission to convention, duty or simple pressure” (p. 172); these people are automatons, who have given up their ability to think critically or originally in order to quell their anxiety and doubts. One can conceivably slip between the different methods of escape. For example, *Fight Club*’s narrator wakes up from his time as an automaton only to enter the dynamic of symbiosis and then ultimately subscribes to fascist ideology, and *Invisible Monsters*’ Shannon wakes up from her life as an automaton only to find a magic helper in the person of Brandy Alexander.

Palahniuk’s novels are replete with characters who are desperate to escape the position they are in, whether it is their lifestyle, their identity, their body or the capitalist context itself; the latter, of course, shaping and sanctioning the former. However, their escape routes invariably lead them into dysfunctional communities and flawed relationships, undermining the idea that Palahniuk’s work contains portrays any specific ‘solutions’ to the problem of capitalist subjectivity.

From Disease to Community?

Palahniuk's isolated characters appear to yearn for connection, and his novels repeatedly follow characters who endeavour to form unconventional families and peripheral communities. The plots of *Fight Club* (1996), *Invisible Monsters* (1999), *Survivor* (1999), *Choke* (2001) and *Snuff* (2008) all focus on a disconnected narrator-protagonist and their often awkward, misguided and, most importantly for this chapter, ambiguous attempts to surmount the distance between themselves and others and find belonging. As previously mentioned, these plots have been read as outlining the way forward for the subject of capitalism, positioning 'community' as the solution to their problems.

While it is difficult to argue against the commonly-held idea that the subject of capitalism needs more community and deeper relationships in their lives, the idea that the portrayal of these community-focused plots could influence Palahniuk's reader to such an extent that it would lead them to resist their capitalist subjectivity is unconvincing for a number of reasons. First, as will be seen, even the most superficial reading of the novels lends itself to the conclusion that these communities are satirized as dysfunctional and problematic, not empowering and emancipatory. Indeed, the process of Palahniuk's characters searching for and entering these communities and relationships clearly parallels the process of the insecure 'free' subject attempting to form secondary bonds, as described by Fromm. Furthermore, some of the communities that Palahniuk describes – those in *Fight Club* – appear like prototypes for the right-wing movements that are gaining traction currently, especially in the United States.

Fight Club's narrator is reminiscent of Fromm's 'automaton' in that he conforms to his society's expectations; he has a good job and earns a lot of money and he has a nice apartment filled with typically 'nice' things that everyone else also possesses, such as "the

Vild hall clock made of galvanized steel” and “the Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern” (p. 43). He is exactly what his society wants him to be. However, the narrator is not entirely like Fromm’s unthinking automaton – unlike the automaton, he suffers from insomnia and a terrible loneliness. He refers to his experience of existence as “the insomnia distance of everything, you can’t touch anything and nothing can touch you” (p. 21).

Having realized how dysfunctional and meaningless his life as a ‘corporate drone’ is, the first method with which the narrator attempts to assuage his anxieties and fears is by attending support groups. Indeed, the narrator initially finds the support groups to be the ideal outlet for his fear and anxiety, and he takes solace from the community he finds there, using them to experience the demonstrative human contact he otherwise does not have. For example, one evening, at Remaining Men Together, a support group for men with testicular cancer, he cries in Big Bob’s arms and subsequently his chronic insomnia is cured: “babies don’t sleep this well” (p. 22). It appears that the narrator has been sated by the human contact that he was missing, and this has cured his pathologies. Finally, he has a place where he can ostensibly connect with people on an emotional level that is largely outside the bounds of mainstream capitalist culture, though still sanctioned by it. Subsequently, the narrator cries in Bob’s arms “every week” (p. 17); a satire of a therapeutic session that must be infinitely repeated, which goes some way to indicating how unlikely it is that the support groups will be able to fundamentally change the narrator’s life.

Despite being places where people can reveal their emotions, the idea that these groups depict the cure for what ails the capitalist subject is overly simplistic. Rather, they serve to highlight how difficult it is to escape capitalist rationalities, even when one wants to. As will be seen, the narrator not only views the support groups instrumentally but uses them

to create ‘secondary bonds,’ the method of assuaging anxiety, theorized by Fromm, that precludes the freedom to develop a unique and original self.

On the most basic level the support groups fail to provide the narrator any alternative ways of being because they simply do not offer a reprieve from the instrumental relations that govern his society. Inhabiting as he does a world of instrumental relationships, the narrator carries this instrumentality into the support groups. Rather than attending the groups to offer genuine support and companionship to others at a time of shared suffering and trauma, the narrator attends to release the negative emotions that are engendered by the ways of being he must adopt and cannot escape. The relationships are not reciprocal; the narrator focuses solely on taking what he needs from others. He explains: “this is the only place I ever really relax and give up. This is my vacation” (p. 18).

The support groups are an escape for the narrator, but rather than allowing him to escape from his subjectivity the groups, they also represent only a temporary escape from reality. When he is wrapped in Big Bob’s embrace, he feels like he is “lost inside oblivion, dark and silent and complete” (p. 22), which, incidentally, is redolent of the state induced by fight club, referring to which the narrator explains that “after a night in fight club, everything in the real world gets the volume turned down” (1996, p. 50). What the narrator enjoys about the support groups is not that they are transformative but that they take the sting out of the real world.

The groups do not allow the narrator to escape from subjectivity because even within the space of the support groups, he continues to act in line with the rationality of his society; he uses others as means to an end. He sees the people in the support groups as objects that can give him what he needs. Underscoring this, the narrator attends under false pretenses; he doesn’t have testicular cancer, or tuberculosis, or a brain parasite, or any of the other

conditions that he attends the support groups for. His connection with others in the community is based on a lie; on sharing with them an affliction that he does not actually share. As he admits, “Bob loves me because he thinks my testicles were removed, too” (p. 17). The narrator doesn’t even use his real name at the groups (p. 19), further undermining the idea that the support groups are sites of profound connection between humans and what the contemporary capitalist world needs more of.

The narrator stops getting his emotional needs met at the groups when he encounters Marla in the testicular cancer support group and recognises that she is a “faker” like himself (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 35). Marla’s encounters with death at the groups make her feel more alive. She tells the narrator: “I used to work in a funeral home to feel good about myself...funerals are nothing compared to this” (p. 38). He explains that “Marla’s lie reflects my lie, and all I can see are lies” (p. 23). If the narrator is a faker, and he knows Marla is a faker, he cannot be certain that other members of the support group are not fakers too: “Marla’s the faker. You’re the faker. Everyone around when they wince or twitch...it’s all just a big act” (p. 35). Because of his own fakeness he cannot trust the genuineness of the communities anymore and consequently he cannot get his needs met in the communities. Central to the narrator’s experience of the support groups is the authenticity of the pain of others. When the narrator realizes that potentially *he* is being used in the same way as he uses others, he ceases to be comfortable in the support groups. The realization that things are not as they seem is anxiety inducing – he needs to find another way to cope with the society he inhabits. It is at this stage in the novel that he invents fight club.

Both the narrator and Marla use the support groups not to challenge the status quo but as a way of releasing the anxieties that come from having adopted the narrow rationality of Fromm’s automaton and being unable to attain the positive freedom that would really

challenge it. Rather than describing a 'way out' for the neoliberal capitalist subject, these characters' use of the support groups in *Fight Club* illustrate just how difficult it is to discard capitalist rationality, one key aspect of which is viewing others as means to an end, and work towards true freedom.

Finally, the support groups in *Fight Club* represent the capitalist's subject's turn towards 'symbiosis,' as described by Fromm. Fromm explains that one way for the capitalist subject to try to absolve themselves of responsibility for themselves is to develop dysfunctional symbiotic relationships whereby they become dependent on another person or group (1942/2001, p. 136). Both parties in a symbiotic relationship need each other because the relationship allows them to lose the feelings of loneliness, insecurity and anxiety that come with living in a capitalist society. More fundamentally, symbiosis "is the means to an aim: forgetting one's self" (p. 133). In the narrator's case, he has developed a symbiosis with Big Bob. The narrator is comforted by Big Bob and finds oblivion in his arms; when crying in Big Bob's arms, he can give up responsibility for himself, even if only briefly. Though it is not explicated in the novel, one can speculate that Big Bob gets something out of this relationship too; he is able to be the narrator's protector, his comforter, and he too is able to forget himself and his disease in this role. Fromm explains that, if the symbiotic relationship finally breaks down, generally the parties involved will quickly move on to a new symbiosis, thus ensuring that they can continue to subsume their selves (p. 152).

As already mentioned, when the support groups fail to provide the narrator what he needs, he establishes fight club – the most famous of Palahniuk's fringe communities. In the novel, fight club is portrayed as a place where disaffected individuals can find companionship with others who share their deep sense of isolation. The individuals who attend fight club have all realised that their lives are ordered according to capitalist values, which are largely

uninterrogated in their society. Fight club is his attempt to break out of this isolated existence and connect with others who have also wakened to the reality that they have given up their selves and become what capitalism expects them to be.

Thus, fight clubs serve two broad functions. The first of these is to create community; when the narrator starts going to fight club, he finally feels understood. He declares: “a lot of best friends meet for the first time at fight club” (p. 54). The second function of fight club is, ostensibly, to give the fighters a measure of freedom from the systems they live within, find out who they really are, and in doing so potentially encourage subjective change, though the novel does not use this terminology. The idea that fight club is a space away from ‘the real world,’ where different rationalities can be formed, is reinforced when the narrator explains: “Who guys are in fight club is not who they are in the real world” (p. 50). He claims that, encountering a fighter outside of fight club, “you wouldn’t be talking to the same man” (p. 50). Fight club changes the men in that they care less about following the injunctions of society, particularly materialism and the foregrounding of one’s career.

Fighting also brings the fighters’ focus to their bodies, giving fight club an immediacy that is often not present in their lives outside the group. Following the idea that the fight clubs represent a space of positive change, fight club has been referred to as a ‘transgressional heterotopia,’ somewhere people are able to rebel against normative behaviour and in the transgression of boundaries create innovative ways of being (Dodge, 2015). Interestingly, the cult following of *Fight Club* was such that in the years following the book’s publication real fight clubs started being established. Palahniuk himself, trying to explain the reason behind this phenomenon, speculates that it is because the characters he portrayed found in fight club “a reason to gather, to discover that they all share the same fears, and to take gradual action,” and that the story presented a structure for people to be together. People want to see new

ways for connecting” (Palahniuk, 2008, p. xviii). Clearly, the idea of fight club has resonated with a lot of readers.

Unfortunately, there are some very good reasons to think that fight club is definitively not the answer to the neoliberal subject’s problems of instrumental rationality and disconnection. Much has been written on this, however, the most significant issue with fight club for this discussion is that it not only fails to generate the positive freedom to create new ways of being but fails to exclude capitalist rationalities in the first place. Rather, it replicates some of the conditions of the society that the men hope so much to escape, which is unsurprising, since as ‘automatons’ there is the conundrum that they have been conditioned and shaped by capitalism. For example, it has been pointed out that fight club is based on “hyperindividualism” (Giroux & Szeman, 2002, p. 99) and offers up a “privatized version of agency and politics” (Giroux & Szeman, 2002, p. 100), just as capitalism does. While offering the fighters a shelter from the capitalist, competitive world where they find themselves alienated from others, fight club paradoxically offers up more of the same; a place where a person will succeed in a competition, based on their individual efforts – one of the core precepts of capitalism. Fight club, ostensibly a place of resistance, a place to unmake subjectivities, just remakes some of the key parts of capitalist rationality. As Marcuse has observed, this kind of “spontaneous reproduction of superimposed needs...only testifies to the efficacy of the controls” (1964/2002, p. 10). In this case, the reproduction of the conditions of neoliberal capitalism in what is meant to be a space of liberation serves to demonstrate how difficult it is to achieve the true freedom to explore different modes of being.

Another criticism of fight club is that it is a homogenous space, where some identities are privileged and others are invisible or excluded entirely (Dodge, 2015, p. 330). To build on

this idea, while fight club is described as a place where all the men are equal, it is a limited and contradictory equality. For a start, there is a leader; Tyler Durden. There are also no women attendees of fight club, the members are repeatedly referred to as ‘men’ and ‘guys.’ Indeed, in general the characters who attend fight club are virtually indistinguishable from each other, leaving the impression on the reader that fight club is comprised solely of working and middle-class adult men who all look like they are “carved out of wood” (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 51) and who all gain confidence in equal measures. This is problematic for many reasons, but most importantly, when Fromm imagined ‘positive freedom’ or ‘freedom to,’ he imagined an equality where there was an “affirmation of the uniqueness of the individual” (1942/2001, p. 227). At its core, the state of ‘freedom to’ is one in which each individual is able to think their own original thoughts and act spontaneously, by which Fromm means they are not rigidly shaped by any rationality or ideology, be it religious, state or economic. Thus, the community that would exist under ‘positive freedom’ would be one of true individuals. Participating in fight club, the opposite occurs; the markers of individuality are stripped away, and the men repeat slogans and rules such as “the first rule about fight club is you don’t talk about fight club” (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 48). This does not represent freedom to discover their own uniqueness, but rather indoctrination into another – secret – rationality. Indeed, it is interesting that the narrator says that in fight club “there’s hysterical shouting in tongues like at church, and when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved” (p. 51), because the secondary bonds of fight club act in the same way that those formed via religion would. It seems like fight club is just another attempt to create secondary bonds and give up the burden of the self.

That fight club is incapable of generating resistance and transformation is revealed fully when it evolves into Project Mayhem, Tyler and the narrator’s deeply flawed challenge to the consumer capitalism. Project Mayhem is an organisation with a distinct end: to “save

the world” (1996, p. 125) by “blast[ing] the world free of history” (p. 124). It aims to destroy capitalism completely, to erase not only capitalist ideology but the physical structures that it has built, and as the name implies it uses violence to further its ends. Furthermore, it is a structured, hierarchical and bureaucratic organisation. It even has different committees for different projects, such as the Arson Committee, the Mischief Committee and the Assault Committee (p. 119), the names of the committees reinforcing that its methods are destructive.

A key feature of Project Mayhem’s ideology is that obliterating capitalism would allow people – and particularly men – to recover their instincts. It is details such as these that have led to the organisation being described as “atavistic” (Friday, 2003, para. 7). Furthermore, the overwhelming focus on men’s experiences has led to Giroux’s assertion that it “denigrates...all that is feminine” (2001, p. 5) and presents “deeply conventional views of violence, gender relations and masculinity” (p. 6), while Jordan (2002) has argued that Project Mayhem delineates the very opposite of the kind of inclusive politics that could really challenge contemporary capitalism.

The members of Project Mayhem represent the antithesis of Fromm’s free and spontaneous individual. While fight club focused on individual experience, Project Mayhem requires the abnegation of individuality; each man gives up their name and wears a black uniform. They prove their loyalty by undergoing an initiation ritual – getting a painful chemical burn on their hand. This also allows members to identify each other easily. Project Mayhem demands complete obedience and submission; rule two is “you don’t ask questions” and rule five is “you have to trust Tyler” (1996, p. 125). For the purposes of this discussion, it is most important to note that, in Project Mayhem, each member is subsumed into the organisational whole, ensuring that it operates as a single, efficient apparatus. Each man has a distinct part to play: “No one guy understands the whole plan, but each guy is trained to do

one simple task perfectly” (p. 130). Because of this, it has been widely noted that Project Mayhem resembles a fascist organisation (Barker, 2008; Friday, 2003; Giroux, 2001; Jordan, 2002; Lee, 2012; Mathews, 2005; Žižek, 2003).

Indeed, the teachings of Project Mayhem, such as “you are not a beautiful and unique snowflake” (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 134), encourage the kind of obliteration of the individual self and submission to a higher authority that Fromm (1942/2001) argues occurs under fascism. As has already been mentioned, Fromm attributes the rise of fascism in the mid-twentieth century as, at least in part, a response engendered by ‘negative freedom.’ The capitalist individual finds themselves entirely responsible for their “own affairs” and on their “own feet” (p. 90), generating a feeling of insecurity and anxiety that they try to rid themselves of by developing ‘secondary bonds’ so that they are no longer a lone individual. A fascist organisation such as Project Mayhem represents an opportunity to do this. Under fascism, the individual submits to a powerful leader and becomes just one part of a greater whole. In this way, the individual attempts to “overcome his aloneness by eliminating the gap that has arisen between his individual self and the world” (p. 121). While this may serve to make the individual feel less anxious and alone, however, it does not bring them any closer to positive freedom, which includes the “affirmation of the uniqueness of the individual” (p. 227).

Further highlighting that Project Mayhem is not as revolutionary as it claims to be, Palahniuk draws parallels between Project Mayhem and the mainstream society of the novel, which resembles capitalism, by linking them through the image of the space monkey. At the beginning of the novel, the image of the space monkey is employed to describe those, like the narrator, who resemble Fromm’s automaton, doing “the little job [they’re] trained to do” (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 12). Later, this image recurs repeatedly, this time in reference to the men of Project Mayhem. In one passage, the narrator describes Project Mayhem’s members as “a

clockwork of silent men with the energy of trained monkeys, cooking and working and sleeping in teams. Pull a lever. Push a button” (p. 130). The characters of *Fight Club* wanted to be free from the strictures of capitalism, which compelled them to take on specific roles, but they do not find any more freedom Project Mayhem, which is potentially even more oppressive. Taking this into account, it is unlikely that Palahniuk is trying to position Project Mayhem as a transgressive challenge to capitalist ways of being, but rather as another failed attempt to attain freedom.

Rather than truly breaking out of his role as ‘automaton,’ to employ Fromm’s terminology, and developing a unique and original self, the narrator turns to the ‘secondary bonds’ of fight club and Project Mayhem to assuage his fear of freedom. These secondary bonds make him feel secure as part of a greater whole, yet they come with a trade-off. Upon his initiation into Project Mayhem, after the narrator has received the lye burn and while he is still feeling the pain, the first things Tyler mentions are “the animals used in product testing” and the “monkeys shot into space” (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 78). He declares “Without their death, their pain, without their sacrifice...we would have nothing” (p. 78). It appears that Tyler sees the men of Project Mayhem as, like the space monkeys, able to be sacrificed to further greater aims. Upon forging secondary bonds with Project Mayhem, the narrator relinquishes the possibility of being an individual – he, like a space monkey, must sacrifice himself so that the whole can advance.

Magic helpers

The last method by which the characters in Palahniuk’s novels attempt to escape from themselves is through the attainment of a “magic helper,” the person who an individual becomes dependent on and who takes over responsibility for their life. Palahniuk’s novels proliferate with magic helpers, yet aside from Tyler (the magic helper of *Fight Club*’s

narrator) and the ambiguous example of Shane/Brandy in *Invisible Monsters* (who was Shannon's magical helper), almost all the magic helpers are women who the main male character leans on. That most of these magic helpers are women who men become reliant or fixated on is significant considering Fromm posits that sexual desire is often a key factor of magic helper (1942/2001, p. 150). This thesis has already discussed the narrator of *Fight Club*'s relationship with Tyler, who introduces him to the promise of change through fight club and Project Mayhem, and it has also discussed Shannon's relationship with Brandy Alexander in *Invisible Monsters*, so this section will focus on other examples: the narrator's relationship with Marla in *Fight Club*, Tender Branson's relationship with Fertility in *Survivor* and Victor Mancini's relationship with Dr. Paige Marshall in *Choke*. These key relationships do not represent love relationships that could truly be potentially transformative but rather the characters' attempts to escape from freedom into a dependence on another person.

There are important similarities between the narrator/Marla, Tender/Fertility and Victor/Dr. Paige relationships. Firstly, the male main character is insecure and anxious, and wants to escape the position they are in. All of these male characters have tried to participate and flourish in capitalist society, with varying degrees of success, but have developed a strong cynicism towards their society and the desire to change. All of them have developed compulsive ways of dealing with their anxiety and so obliterating the self; the narrator of *Fight Club* first embraces the role of automaton, and then turns to support groups and fight club; Tender pours all his efforts into becoming a celebrity religious leader, effacing himself and his own desires in the process; Victor is an addict who uses sex as an anesthetic. These points have been covered elsewhere in this thesis. All of these main characters also attach themselves to a female character who they are attracted to and either have sex with or want to have sex with. The narrator of *Fight Club* sleeps with Marla via his alter-ego Tyler. Tender

becomes obsessed with Fertility and part of the novel is devoted to his “terrible plan” to make her lower her standards and thereby fall in love with him (1999b, p. 225). Dr. Paige Marshall is Victor’s fixation, and he confesses that “no matter who I’m with, my head’s inside this other girl. This Dr. Paige Something. Marshall” (2001, p. 73).

Furthermore, each of the women is presented as having something ostensibly ‘wrong’ with them. Marla appears to hate herself. She makes suicide attempts (1996, p. 59) and self-harms “Marla’s at the kitchen table, burning the inside of her arm with a clove cigarette and calling herself human butt wipe” (p. 65). The narrator treats her poorly, repeatedly telling her to go away, but she keeps coming back to him. Fertility Hollis has prophetic dreams in which she sees people die in disasters. Unable to save anyone, she too talks of committing suicide (1999b, p. 213). Finally, Dr. Paige Marshall’s issue is that she is not a doctor but a patient in a psychiatric ward who believes she is from the year 2556 (2001, p. 277). Victor’s desire for her is based almost entirely on the fact he enjoys imagining that he will be able to make a doctor one of his sexual conquests.

Gradually throughout the novels, these female characters become the centre of the male characters’ action, something that has been read as suggesting the transformative power of love (de Rocha, 2005; Kavadlo, 2005). An alternative reading is that these characters become the male characters’ magic helpers. The male characters fixate on the females, thereby avoiding any real confrontation with reality and avoiding the possibility of authentic transformation altogether. For example, at the end of *Fight Club* the narrator appears to have come to an important realization: “I know why Tyler had occurred. Tyler loved Marla. From the first night I met her, Tyler or some part of me had needed a way to be with Marla” (1996, p. 198). The narrator has sought solace in fight clubs, support groups and Project Mayhem, all of which have failed him, so finally he settles on Marla as being the key to understanding

his own actions. While the narrator is trying to decide whether to commit suicide, he wonders what he has got to live for: “What else is there? Step over the edge. There’s Marla. Jump over the edge. There’s Marla, and she’s in the middle of everything and doesn’t know it. And she loves you” (1996, p. 193). On the surface, it appears that the narrator has finally recognised that his love with Marla is worth living for. However, this is a very idealistic way of viewing the text, considering how badly the narrator has treated Marla throughout up to this point. Their relationship is hardly reminiscent of the love between two secure and spontaneous individuals that Fromm describes as being one of the glimpses of positive freedom in the capitalist society (1942/2001, pp. 224-225). Rather, the narrator and Marla’s relationship represents the antithesis of positive freedom; the narrator has become enmeshed with Marla. By the end of the novel it appears that has even become the very reason for his existence. He uses her as his magic helper, as the person who will save him from that burden he must carry alone, *himself*.

Survivor’s Fertility Hollis aligns even more clearly with the magic helper than Marla, whose magic is represented in her name and is further made explicit in the novel right from her first appearance. Tender first meets Fertility in a cemetery, so he thinks she may be a ghost, though it makes little difference to him: “Demon or angel or evil spirit, I just need something to show itself. Ghoulie or ghosty or long-legged beastly, I just want my hand held” (p. 253). Later in the novel she is referred to as “some jaded survivor, some immortal, an Egyptian vampire...” (p. 120). Fertility is portrayed as other-worldly, enchanted. This is further enforced by her prophetic dreams. Considering that the novel is narrated in the first-person with Tender as the narrator, it can be concluded that these descriptions reflect the way that he sees her: as a magical helper who is going to save him, or at the very least make his life better. Tender does not really see Fertility as an individual, rather, he is simply desperate to find someone on whom he can become dependent so that he does not feel alone and

insecure anymore. Furthermore, Fertility is willing to enter the symbiosis; she recognises that Tender is “just so needy and pathetic” (p. 235) and notes that “he really needs somebody” (p. 177). Fertility feels “sorry for him” and wants “to help him” (p. 176). Indeed, right to the very end of the novel, Fertility helps Tender, first by letting him pretend her gift of prophecy is his so that he can garner religious followers, and then with “an intervention” (p. 54) after his celebrity life becomes unbearable. As Tender says, “you can’t call Fertility Hollis anybody’s fairy godmother, but you’d be surprised where she turns up” (p. 121).

Whenever Tender is in quandary, Fertility arrives with a plan to save him. Even right at the end of the novel, when Tender is alone on a plane that is about to crash, it seems that Tender believes that Fertility is integral to his escape: “according to Fertility, if I could only figure out how to escape. I could escape being up here. I could escape the crash” (p. 3). He believes that if he just follows her instructions to tell his “life story right up to the moment the plane hit the ground” (p. 2) he may survive. His trust in her magic is still concomitant with his desire for her, though, as at the same time he explains this to the reader, he imagines that if he survives, they will be able to work on having “better sex” (p. 2). Tender’s belief that Fertility may be able to prevent his death in the plane crash is consistent with Fromm’s argument that the individual expects the magic helper to offer comfort, protection and company, and to “never leave him alone” (p. 1942/2001, p. 151). Thus, even when Tender really is alone on the plane, he thinks that Fertility will be able to protect him. Throughout the novel, Tender consistently gives his responsibility for himself and his fate to Fertility, a situation that clearly gives him comfort, even during what may be his last moments alive.

Finally, Dr. Paige Marshall starts *Choke* as just “another potential dose of sexual anesthetic” (2001, p. 69) for Victor, who is obsessed with her because she is the ‘one who got away’ (2001, p. 73). Yet again, it is not the female character as an individual that interests the

male character, but rather what the female represents; someone with whom they can enter a symbiotic relationship in order to forget their anxiety and insecurity. The fact that Paige Marshall is a doctor – or at least Victor thinks she is – is important in that it reinforces her position in his life as ‘magic helper’. For Victor, Dr. Paige Marshall represents competence, self-assurance, and most importantly, a caretaker. He watches as she looks after the elderly in the hospital and clearly hopes that she will also take care of him. In fact, Paige does help him, ostensibly translating his mother’s diary from Italian to English – later Victor finds out she cannot speak Italian – and taking responsibility for his elderly mother’s death so that Victor, the real killer, can escape blame. Victor is completely bereft when he eventually finds out that Paige Marshall is not a doctor but a “lunatic” (p. 271). Dr. Paige Marshall made Victor feel good about himself; indeed, he got his self-worth through having an attractive, capable doctor pay attention to him. When he finds out that being a doctor is one of Paige’s delusions, it invalidates all that he got from her: “I’m not loved. I’m not a beautiful soul. I’m not a good-natured, giving person... All of that’s bogus now that she’s insane” (p. 272). He has lost his magic helper.

The end of the novel is surprisingly optimistic, suggesting that, while Victor has lost Paige as his magic helper, he may be able it may be possible for the two of them to have a loving, reciprocal relationship instead. By this stage in the narrative everyone in Victor’s life has deserted him, apart from Paige, and in the closing pages they “just look at each other, at who each other is for real. For the first time” (p. 292). As with the ending of *Fight Club*, in which the narrator realizes he and Marla are in love, this ending of *Choke* has been read as positioning love as both the answer to the contemporary subject’s problems and a potential route to freedom. However, not everyone is convinced that this optimistic reading should be read so straightforwardly. A different reading suggests that the “redemption, as afforded by

the novel's supposedly constructive and hopeful ending, is a sentimental sham..." (Blazer, 2009, p. 155).

Is optimistic ending also just another illusion? How can the contemporary subject, represented in this case by Victor Mancini, enmeshed as he is in the iron cage of neoliberal capitalist rationality, which is reproduced in political life as well as culture, spontaneously shake off his need for secondary bonds and attain the positive freedom to explore new, authentic ways of being and connect with others? Again I would argue that the plot and content of these novels do not offer solutions, but by their "sham-ness" expose the multiple ways we try to escape the loneliness of neoliberal subjectivity.

As suggested by Palahniuk's words in the epigraph to this chapter, the 'American dream' is to escape from "the rabble" by creating a "lovely isolated nest" (2004, p. xv). Palahniuk's characters often come to realise that their pursuit of this dream makes them "alone and lonely" so they look to community or coupledness to save them from their isolation. My contention, as in the previous chapter, is that some of Palahniuk's commentators have under-read the novels, because they are also enmeshed in neoliberal subjectivity, and have misunderstood the novels' turn to community as a straightforward means to challenge capitalist rationality instead of understanding it as a more complex, satirized gesture.

The idea that Palahniuk's novels point to community as the solution to the contemporary subject's problems is also a problematically naïve stance. Firstly, it is a view that regards his writing (and perhaps fiction generally) as presenting an uncomplicated blueprint for the reader to follow, and as an extension of this positions the author as heroically astute. Yet *Fight Club*, *Survivor*, *Invisible Monsters* and *Choke* lack any credible detail as to how the anxious, insecure characters may be suddenly able to properly connect

with and love others, when they consistently treat others as means to soothe their own anxieties. Instead, the love and connection portrayed in the novels generally relies on a moment of epiphany, and always presents itself right before the novel ends, where it can stand as a deceptively positive and unenacted resolution; a gesture I read as satirical of solutions.

Furthermore, Palahniuk's characters consistently struggle to connect genuinely and unambiguously with others. The novels are full of characters who consume community and connection to mitigate their anxiety, whether through symbiosis and dependence on a 'magic helper' or through the secondary bonds of a group or an organized movement. In Palahniuk's novels, as in reality, community is, on one hand, idealized as the solution to the problems of both the individual and capitalist society. On the other hand, however, the neoliberal capitalist subject is prevented from genuine community with others due to their rationality and lack of 'freedom to.' What is clear is that any group attempting political or social change should heed the warnings gained through an analysis of Palahniuk's fiction, informed by Fromm. Such an analysis shows us that it is difficult to truly act and think outside ways of being that have taken on the appearance of the natural, and that there is a powerful allure in subsuming oneself into an ordered system to escape the isolation of 'freedom from' unaccompanied by 'freedom to.'

Breaking Through the Routine of Capitalist Life

If Palahniuk's 'fringe communities' fail to convincingly challenge capitalist rationalities, what alternate challenge does his fiction proffer? I argue that, at times, Palahniuk's writing has the potential to break through what Fromm calls the "routinization" (1955/2002, p. 139) of everyday life under capitalism by reminding the reader that they will

die one day. Even more importantly, some passages of Palahniuk's writing encourage the reader to *feel* the fact of their death. A confrontation with the tragedy of death – a part of life largely excluded from capitalist societies – can in turn reveal the contingency of capitalism, an increased awareness of which is necessary for any change to occur.

Fromm explains that a key aspect of capitalist life is “*routinization, and the repression of awareness of the basic problems of human existence* [emphasis in original]” (1955/2002, pp. 139-140). The necessity of earning money, selling one's best attributes, and completing the mundane tasks of existence means that people have become “enmeshed” in routine (p. 140) and estranged from the deeper realities of being alive. Reconciliation with these deeper realities, as well as with emotions such as love and a sense of tragedy, is a vital aspect of attaining positive freedom. Fromm declares:

Man can fulfil himself only if he remains in touch with the fundamental facts of his existence, if he can experience the exaltation of love and solidarity, as well as the tragic fact of his aloneness and the fragmentary character of his existence. (p. 140)

Art and ritual have throughout history been used by different cultures to attempt to access the “fundamental facts” that lie beneath the world of everyday routine social relations (pp. 140-141). However, Fromm laments that, under mid-twentieth century capitalism at least, “Man hardly ever gets out of the realm of man-made conventions and things, and hardly ever breaks through the surface of his routine...” due to the prevalence of art-as- commodity rather than as genuine expression, and also because of the decline of ritual in Western countries that is concomitant with the spread of capital into all areas of life (p. 141). These conditions are anathema to the positive freedom that Fromm describes as “*the spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality*” (p. 222), spontaneity in this case meaning “of one's free will” (p. 223). The capitalist subject is almost completely taken up by the inevitability of their

world, which is reinforced by the media and socio-political systems as well as the material practises of everyday life, and lacks the ability to be a spontaneous individual.

The knowledge of death is one thing that has the potential to ‘break through’ the routine of the capitalist system, allowing space for positive freedom, and Palahniuk’s novels contain many moments when characters, and more importantly the reader, are confronted with their mortality. The most famous of these moments occur in *Fight Club*, which has been thoroughly analysed in terms of its existential elements (the realisation of the tragedy of death and the concomitant urgency of life being important ones). For example, it has been argued that the novel’s “recurring references to sickness and death are best understood as an exploration of how existentialist dread can help foster a more authentic sense of human freedom” (Bennett, 2005, p. 71). In the most well-known of these references, made famous by David Fincher’s film version of *Fight Club*, the narrator and Tyler Durden put a gun to the head of a liquor store clerk. The narrator explains: “Raymond Hessel closed both eyes so I pressed the gun hard against his temple so he would always feel it pressing right there and I was beside him and this was his life and he could be dead at any moment” (1996, p. 151); “Probably he figured I was after his money...no, this wasn’t about money. Not everything is about money” (p. 152). The narrator tells Raymond that if he does not follow his dream to be a veterinarian, they will return to kill him.

In the novel, this is part of “homework” set by Tyler for every man in fight club. They all must pretend they are going to kill twelve men each and bring their drivers’ licenses to Tyler as proof. The logic behind this is to break as many people as possible free from the routines and strictures of capitalist life by reminding them that they are going to die. “You’re not your sad little wallet” (p. 152), the narrator tells Raymond Hessel, and here, the use of ‘you’ is deliberately ambiguous. He is talking to Raymond Hessel but the ‘you’ could equally

be addressed to the reader. In the novel, Tyler forces an awareness of mortality as a way to challenge capitalist subjectivities, but it seems that Palahniuk is attempting the same thing. Another example of Palahniuk using this technique is: “this is your life, and it’s ending one minute at a time” (p. 29). Here, the narrator repeats to the reader something that Tyler said to him (the narrator), suggesting that the narrator or even Palahniuk could equally be addressing the reader. This direct address is “one of an author’s simplest tools for encouraging the reader to identify with a character’s situation” (Parker, 2009, p. 91) and it can be argued that Palahniuk wants his reader to do more than simply identify with his character’s situation; he intends for his reader to recognize that they are in the exact same situation; they live in a system that equates a person’s value with the amount of money they have and if they could break the routinization of existence and recognize that their life is “ending one minute at a time” they could potentially challenge this way of being.

Palahniuk seems to be trying to create a similar effect in *Rant* (2007), in which characters are portrayed as participating in an event called ‘Party Crashing,’ where they dress up and deliberately crash their cars into each other. The Party Crashers set out to consistently remind themselves that whatever they are doing, however successful they are, death is “already stalking” them (p. 194). This is a thread that runs through many of Palahniuk’s novels. Indeed, the rationale for Party Crashing sounds like it could have come straight from Tyler in *Fight Club*. One of the Party Crashers explains: “These are regular people watching their lives squeezed down into dollars, all the hours and days of their life compressed the way the crumple zones of a car get sacrificed” (p. 129). The characters participate in Party Crashing because they want to feel break through the ‘routinization’ of their lives and confront the fact that they are going to die; a fact that they find liberating rather than oppressive. Another Party Crasher explains the effects of being in a car crash:

How about if your mom is yelling, calling you a lazy fuck, and you lost another job, and your friends from school, they have everything going, and you don't even have a date?...but out of nowhere – slam-bo! – somebody crashes into you, and you're better? Isn't it like a gift, somebody slamming you? ...Like you're a baby being born? (p. 206)

The Party Crasher describes their confrontation with their own mortality in terms of being 'born' because such confrontations with death strip away their layers of capitalist rationality and leave them nothing but themselves. Or, in other words, confrontations with death make them free to potentially construct new ways of being.

Unfortunately, in contemporary society the awareness of death – or what Fromm terms the “sense of tragedy” has become ‘taboo’ (1942/2001, p. 211). Yet Fromm argues that “the awareness of death and of the tragic aspect of life, whether dim or clear, is one of the basic characteristics of man” (p. 211), and an essential part of positive freedom (p. 212). Thus, the characters in *Fight Club* and *Rant* represent the need to recognise that death is a significant part of life, and a part that must be acknowledged if the instrumental rationality of capitalism is to be challenged and complete freedom is to be obtained. The representation of characters engaging in such processes, especially through the use of second-person pronouns and direct address, can potentially in turn have an effect on the reader, even if it means, as it does for the characters, only briefly breaking them out of the ‘routinization’ of capitalist life.

The instances when the characters contend with death can potentially challenge the reader's rationality, but there are more crucial existential moments in Palahniuk's novels, in which the reader is brought in contact with death through realistic description. In *Haunted* (2005), for example, rather than relying on aspects of the plot and forceful phrases about the shortness of life to break the routinization of the reader's life, Palahniuk begins to include graphic descriptions of the dead or dying body. In contrast to Palahniuk's depiction of his characters in *Haunted* as broad types or caricatures and their actions as being overblown and

ridiculous, these descriptions are meticulously realistic and apparently scientifically accurate; Palahniuk obviously did some research. There is a detailed description of how a person starves, for example: “This is when your blood fills with ketones. Your serumacetone concentrations soar, and your breath starts to smell...Your small intestine swells from disuse and fills with mucous” (p. 344). Here, again, is the direct address that Palahniuk regularly employs to bring his message to his reader. Later, when referring to some dead characters, the narrator describes their cells turning into a “runny yellow protein” (p. 376)

The most striking and notable of these graphic, realistic descriptions occurs when Mrs. Clark describes the decomposition of her daughter’s dead body, lying in a forest clearing. The description of the decomposition process meanders across four pages (pp. 350-353), spanning a time-period from when Cassandra simply looks like she is asleep to when “her guts leak away, Soaking into the ground. Leaving just this shadow of skin, this framework of bones mired in a puddle of her own mud” (p. 353). The passage is too long to quote in full, but the following provides an indication of the style and tone of the descriptions:

Her cells are digesting themselves, still trying to do some job. Desperate for food, the enzymes inside start eating through the cell walls, and the yellow within each cell starts to leak out. Cassandra’s pale skin starts to slip, sliding slack over the muscle underneath. Puckering and wrinkling, the skin on her hands looks as loose as cotton gloves. Her skin is marked by bumps beyond counting, a field of what could be tiny knife scars, every bump moving, grazing between skin and muscle. Every bump the larva of a black fly. Eating the thin layer of subcutaneous fat, tunnelling just under her skin. (pp. 351-352)

The passage is slow, detailed, and factual, unlike so much of Palahniuk’s work, which cuts quickly from scene to scene and motif to motif. The contrast between the two styles emphasises the realism of the descriptions of decay even further, showing death as an implacable reality – unlike capitalism, which is always under question in the novels.

According to Fromm, capitalist society “denies death and with it one fundamental aspect of life. Instead of allowing the awareness of death and suffering to become one of the strongest incentives for life, the basis for human solidarity, and an experience without which joy and enthusiasm lack intensity and depth, the individual is forced to repress it” (1942/2001, p. 212). For Fromm, the repression of death is one barrier to positive freedom; the individual with ‘freedom to’ would likely have an awareness of their own mortality, which would in turn bolster their ability to live a truly individual life. Palahniuk’s writing is a challenge to this repression, and, consequently, his portrayal of death in his novels is one aspect of them that challenges capitalist rationality and contributes to positive freedom. There are moments in Palahniuk’s writing when the routinized capitalist world that Fromm described is stripped away by the description of death, which each of us undeniably and inevitably shares, and, through this, some space is created for a more vital reality.

Palahniuk includes descriptions of death and dead bodies in his novels not for shock value but because the understanding that one is going to die can be used as a counterweight to the ways in which human beings in contemporary Anglo-American capitalist societies are living. The awareness that the body will decline and be disposed of eventually can free the individual living under capitalism, even briefly, from the instrumentality and routinization of contemporary life, and allow them to glimpse contingent character of capitalism. The awareness of the contingent character of capitalism can subsequently lead to the realisation that one can live differently. Furthermore, this engagement with the deep tragedy of life has a relationship to the creativity that is needed to attain positive freedom. Erich Fromm has said that humans under capitalism are encouraged to “think and to live without emotions” (1942/2001, p. 211) and argues that this makes creative thinking difficult, because creativity is linked to emotion (p. 211). On the other hand, having a sense of the profound tragedy of

life can spur people towards attempting to find creative, alternative ways of being; towards positive freedom.

Unresolved Issues

As has been demonstrated throughout this thesis, Palahniuk's novels portray dysfunctional, isolated characters who in many ways resemble the contemporary subject of capitalism. This thesis has used a variety of theoretical terms to analyse the characters, but in essence the novels portray characters who are deeply unhappy with their lives and go on literal and metaphorical journeys to try to connect not only with others but also with their 'real' selves. Underlying these journeys is the each of the main characters' desire to find new ways of being in the world, or 'freedom to'. At the end of some of the novels, such as *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters*, *Survivor* and *Choke*, it appears that the main character has, through their experiences, reached the point where they may be able to shed their old rationality and develop a truly new life for themselves. Yet, no sooner does the character reach this point of possibility than the novel ends, leaving the character's new life forever un-depicted, and the central issues of the novels unresolved. Other novels, notably *Pygmy*, seem to end neatly yet have the uncomfortable effect of appearing to have too easily skimmed over central problems.

These unresolved endings are perhaps how Palahniuk avoids properly answering the questions his novels raise. After all, as a subject of contemporary capitalism, Palahniuk is writing from within his society and, contrary to what some commentators have suggested, is in no position to fully diagnose and, furthermore, prescribe the remedies for his society. Another interpretation of these endings, however, suggests that their unresolved-ness can emphasise the contradictions and inconsistencies of material society. Playwright Bertolt

Brecht, for example, envisaged a theatre that not only presented the audience with social problems but kindled in them the desire to solve the problems of their society (1949/1964, p. 190). Brecht criticised traditional forms of theatre that allowed the audience “swap a contradictory world for a consistent one” (1949/1964, p. 188), so while Aristotelian and classical theatre grant the audience catharsis, Brecht aimed to disrupt traditional narrative and leave the “social antagonisms” of reality “unresolved” (Squiers, 2013). As such, Brecht advocated a theatre of alienation that, amongst other things, resisted “the restoration of order” (1949/1964, p. 189). While his main interest was theatre, at times Brecht’s writings focus more broadly on literature in general, and some of his comments on the use of narrative form and other techniques in literature to disrupt the reader or audience’s customary ways of thinking provide valuable insight into the effect a novel can have on its reader (see Brecht, 1967/1977). Thus, Palahniuk’s unresolved endings can not only unveil social inconsistencies to the reader, but they can encourage the reader to participate in the re-imagining of their society.

Like *Survivor*, *Invisible Monsters* and *Choke*, the central issue of *Fight Club* is whether the main character will be able to find a new way to live; in other words, whether he will be able to find ‘freedom to’ discover and develop his unique self, and form deep connections with others, or whether he will continue to rely on instrumental ways of being and secondary bonds. By the end of the novel he has rejected both his role as an ‘office-drone’ automaton and the secondary bonds of Project Mayhem. The novel closes with the narrator in a psychiatric institution, having shot himself in the face to drive out his alter-ego Tyler Durden, the engineer of both fight club and Project Mayhem. Having thus rejected the usual methods of ameliorating the anxiety-inducing difficulties of living under capitalism, it appears that the narrator is on the verge of being able to shed his old subjectivity and develop an authentic new life for himself.

Yet the possibility of success for the narrator's escape from his own life is undermined in the last few pages of the novel. Unfortunately, it becomes apparent that while the narrator does not want to be Tyler Durden, the world still sees him as Tyler Durden. He confesses that "every once in a while, somebody brings me my lunch tray and my meds and he has a black eye or his forehead is swollen with stitches, and he says: 'We miss you Mr. Durden'" (p. 207). He continues: "Or somebody with a broken nose pushes a mop past me and whispers: 'Everything's going according to the plan... We look forward to getting you back'" (p. 208). The implication of these statements is that, while the narrator may want to leave his old communities and supports behind, he may not be able to extricate himself from his established life, which will either literally or symbolically insist on his return. Thus, at the end of the novel, Palahniuk complicates the 'happy ending' that he had established, in so doing reawakening the problem of whether anyone can really escape from their society and casting doubt on the idea that the individual's desire to change can have any substantial affect in the face of powerful social forces and expectations. This complication may be frustrating for the reader, but it is more effective than the tidier denouement focusing on the narrator and Marla's relationship would have been. Following Brecht, a tidy ending could potentially leave the impression of the issues explored in the novel having been 'fixed,' closing off any need to for the reader to continue engaging with them. However, the more complicated and frustrating ending exposes the fact that there is no simple way out of the intricate web of capitalist rationality, no easy blueprint to follow. Rather, there are setbacks and frustrations and no guarantee of success. Thus, the complicated, open ending encourages the reader to continue engaging with the problems of capitalist subjectivity.

The ending of *Survivor* is similarly unresolved. Tender is on a plane that has run out of fuel, telling the story of his life to the plane's black box. This is the last stage of Tender's frantic road trip, in which he undergoes a 'make-under' in order to shed his identity as

religious celebrity. After he has finished telling his story, the desperate Tender explains: “according to Fertility, if I could only figure out how I could escape. I could escape being up here. I could escape the crash. I could escape being Tender Branson” (p. 3). Tender is not only desperate to escape the crash but to escape the rationalities that have controlled him throughout his life; first that of the Creedish Church and then that of capitalism. Nothing he has attempted up to this point has truly challenged his subjectivity and allowed him the freedom to find out who he, uniquely, is. Rather, like all the other main characters under discussion, throughout the novel Tender has either fully embraced capitalist rationality or tried to escape into secondary bonds. On the plane, seeing no way out, he laments: “I’m trapped here. In a nosedive, in my life...And there’s so many things I want to change but can’t” (p. 1). The final line of the novel is “Testing, testing, one, two – ” (p. 1), and it cuts off without further resolution. The result is that Tender forever exists in a suspended animation, neither dead nor alive to finally enact his escape. Would Tender have ever been able to truly escape the forces that shape him, and what would Tender’s life look like, if he had the ‘freedom to’ live spontaneously and uniquely?

The ends of both *Invisible Monsters* and *Choke* similarly refuse the reader any description of what the characters’ new selves and new lives could look like. *Invisible Monsters* ends on a positive note; it seems that Shannon has finally learnt two important lessons; how to love other people and how to finally accept her true self. Having been desperate to “prove to herself” (1999a, p. 295) that she can love someone, she finally declares that she loves her brother Shane/Brandy Alexander “completely and totally, permanently and without hope, forever and ever” (p. 297). Furthermore, she has decided to live without her veils: “I don’t need them at this moment, or the next, or the next, forever” (p. 297). She explains that she will create a new life for herself and, though she is unsure what it will look like, she knows she will “find out” because “there’s no escaping fate, it just keeps going. Day

and night, the future just keeps coming at you” (p. 295). Shannon walks away from her old life after telling Shane/Brandy “please don’t come after me” (p. 295).

By the end of *Choke*, Victor is tired from living in a society that reproduces instrumental ways of being. Having tried to manage his anxiety through developing secondary ties, Victor wants to leave his past mistakes behind and start being, somehow, more authentically himself. He states optimistically that “maybe it’s our job to invent something better” (2001, p. 292) and “We can spend our lives letting the world tell us who we are...Or we can decide for ourselves.” (p. 292). Victor forms a small community with three others, including Dr. Paige Marshall and his best friend Denny, and these characters engage in a symbolic act of trying to build something; they literally decide to build a structure on a vacant lot owned by Denny. The final image of the novel is of Victor and his friends building this mysterious structure out of a pile of rocks. As they build, the collectiveness of their venture is emphasised: “all of us together, we struggle to just put one rock on top of another” (p. 292). Victor’s narration continues:

Here we are, the Pilgrims, the crackpots of our time, trying to establish our own alternate reality.

To build a world out of rocks and chaos. What it’s going to be, I don’t know. And maybe knowing isn’t the point...Where we’re standing right now, in the ruins in the dark, what we build could be anything. (pp. 292-293)

In all four of these novels, *Fight Club*, *Survivor*, *Invisible Monsters* and *Choke*, Palahniuk leads the reader to the point of ‘building something new’ but leaves them there, at the edge of the new world. Each main character is standing at the junction of two options – though in Tender’s case this is dependent on surviving the plane crash. The first option is to finally move forward into the new life and the second option is to slide back into old, dominant ways of acting and being. The first is difficult, and forever unfinished, and the second is in many ways much easier. In other words, these characters are faced with the possibility of attaining

‘freedom to’ and the markedly more likely possibility that they will retain their capitalist rationalities, either being the conforming automaton or assuaging their anxieties by continuing the pursuit of secondary bonds.

Fight Club and *Survivor* are less optimistic than *Invisible Monsters* and *Choke*, but the optimism of the latter two novels is tempered by the lack of concrete ending, which actually reveals an inconsistency: how can these two characters, Shannon and Victor, really hope to ‘build something new,’ when there is no real sign that they will be able to accomplish the daunting task of breaking away from their rationalities? Both characters have ostensibly learnt lessons, but it would be an overstatement to suggest that these lessons include that of how to escape from capitalist subjectivity. The fact that these endings are left unresolved emphasises to the reader the true difficulty of escaping dominant rationalities. To utilise Brecht’s words again, the endings refuse the reader’s desire for a consistent world, instead emphasising the contradictions (1949/1964). In many ways, a ‘happy ending’ in these novels would shore up capitalism by concealing the truths that escape from capitalism is a difficult project and that capitalism challenges escape at every turn. If escape is easy and can be done whenever one chooses, then there is no need to analyse one’s situation more closely. In the case of Palahniuk’s novels, only unresolved endings could challenge the reader’s assumptions about their society and their place within it.

The ending of *Pygmy* is slightly different from the other four endings under discussion in that it is apparently resolved. It still involves a character stepping into what, for them, is a new kind of subjectivity, but in this case, there is no ‘new way of being’ to be portrayed, because *Pygmy* embraces American capitalism. Having infiltrated the United States, *Pygmy*, an operative from a totalitarian regime, is meant to set into motion a plan to destroy the capitalist nation. Yet, having fallen in love with his American host sister, and

having been beguiled by capitalism itself, Pygmy finds that he is unable to complete his plan. Furthermore, he decides to stay in the United States, seeking asylum and “adoption host family” (p. 240). The novel ends with Tender accepting “failure” and admitting that he is “guilty of committing treason” (p. 240). He clearly is not very concerned about this, though, because his final words are hopeful: “Begins here new life of operative me” (p. 241). This ending appears to be very different to the other endings discussed in this section, but should be included in a discussion of the contradictions and tensions at the endings of Palahniuk’s novels because despite appearing to be positive – the United States is saved from a terrorist attack and Pygmy is brought into the fold of not only capitalism but American freedom – the ending is laden with irony.

Pygmy is a novel that consistently and directly satirises capitalism’s failings, emphasising its instrumentality and consumption and excoriating the insidiousness of its ideology. For much of the novel, American capitalism is portrayed so negatively that the reader is positioned to support Pygmy in his mission to destroy the country. At the same time, however, Pygmy’s socialist home country is portrayed equally as negatively. Thus, while the reader wants Pygmy to be able to leave his totalitarian home country, his taking on the mantle of American capitalism is equally unsatisfying. Pygmy appears destined to be subjected to one dehumanising regime or another. While this novel appears to be resolved, and happily, there is no real happy ending for Pygmy; rather, it seems like there is no way for him to escape, no positive freedom for him to develop his authentic and spontaneous self. The disappointment that Pygmy’s escape *into* capitalism engenders in the reader is informative, and both reinforces the novel’s critique of capitalism and elucidates the contradictory feelings the reader may have towards their own society.

Bertolt Brecht advocated for a theatre that, rather than allowing the “the audience to fling itself into the story as if it were a river and let itself be carried vaguely hither and thither,” gives them opportunities to “interpose [their] judgement” (1949/1964, p. 201). Similarly, the ending of Palahniuk’s novels create a space for the reader to critique conventional capitalist rationalities. All the novels discussed above focus on the question of how the main character can escape their subjectivity and create a new life for themselves outside the stifling expectations and rationalities of their society. However, Palahniuk’s novels leave these central issues unresolved even, in the case of *Pygmy* for example, when the plots themselves appear to have been resolved and order restored. By leaving the issues open, the novels exclude the possibility that the readers can be comforted by a consistent world, thus leaving them to face the contradictory feelings generated by Palahniuk’s portrayal of life in contemporary capitalism. Furthermore, like the characters in the novel who are on the verge of building something new, the reader must try to imagine new ways of being and even act to bring these into existence. Palahniuk’s novels end with questions, with spaces that the reader needs to fill in, but these reveal the possibility that things could be different, not only in the characters’ journeys but in the reader’s own life. The questions and spaces can inspire both imagination and the desire to act on it, two things that the reified, routinized capitalist world lacks.

Conclusion

Reading Palahniuk’s novels against Fromm’s theories leads to the conclusion that the communities depicted in Palahniuk’s novels are less subversive than they are representative of one of the standard means of escape for the capitalist subject; the escape from the feeling of isolation engendered by capitalism into the relative security of what Erich Fromm calls ‘secondary bonds.’ Furthermore, this chapter argues that there is little in Palahniuk’s

communities to inspire the reader to a real ‘liberatory’ politics, and much that actually serves to bolster reactionary world-views. The mere depiction of community does not lead to the conditions that would allow a truly transformative community to occur.

Fight clubs, fascism, support groups and sexual relationships are all methods by which Palahniuk’s characters try to soothe their anxieties, so it is unsurprising that so many commentators have chosen to emphasise the necessity for community that is conveyed by the novels. However, while it is clear that the novels explore the need for human connection, it is unrealistic to conclude that these portrayals of community signpost the solution to the problems of capitalist subjectivity; the very instrumental subjectivity that impedes human connection in the first place. Rather, Palahniuk’s depiction of dysfunctional and even destructive relationships and communities in the novels highlights how important it is to achieve ‘freedom to’ if people want to connect with each other authentically, free from the desire to relinquish their selfhood and without the interference of instrumental rationality. Furthermore, Palahniuk’s portrayal of Project Mayhem serves as an important warning to capitalist societies that if people lack the freedom to develop ways of being outside anxiety-inducing instrumental capitalist rationalities, they may turn to other means of feeling part of something. The obliteration of the self through wholesale submission to a powerful leader is the result of ‘freedom from’ without ‘freedom to.’

When writing of his alienation techniques, Brecht declared: “We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field ...but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself” (1949/1964, p. 190). Keeping this in mind, while this chapter argues against the idea that the communities portrayed in Palahniuk’s novels are transformative, there are two ways that the novels work to break through the reader’s

capitalist rationality, thereby encouraging the ‘thoughts and feelings’ that are necessary for transformation. Firstly, at times Palahniuk uses realistic descriptions of decay and death in his novels to break through what Fromm calls the “routinization” of capitalist life and reveal its artificiality. The graphic images of death remind the reader that there is indeed an ‘outside’ to capitalist life and that contemporary ways of being are neither inevitable nor permanent. Secondly, Palahniuk’s novels with-hold the resolution of the social issues they present to the reader, leaving the reader in the position of needing to imagine their own solutions to the problems they are confronted with. This imagining itself can be seen as part of the process of working towards ‘freedom to.’

Erich Fromm argues that ‘freedom to’ already exists under capitalism, but is both ephemeral and rare (1942/2001, p. 223). It is present in love that, unlike the ‘secondary bond,’ which is a way to ease the burden of the self, affirms the uniqueness of the individual (p. 225). This kind of love is almost completely absent from Palahniuk’s novels, or is portrayed only superficially. However, ‘freedom to’ is also evident in praxis, work as “creation” (p. 225) in which “what matters is the activity as such, the process and not the result” (p. 226). Under capitalism, the focus is generally on the latter instead of the former (p. 226). The commentators who either idealise Palahniuk by suggesting he depicts the remedy for the capitalist subject, or, conversely, decry his work as a failure, overlook this crucial point.

In *Fight Club*, the narrator, desperate to find a different way to live, asks: “If I could wake up in a different place, at a different time, could I wake up as a different person?” Palahniuk’s novels seem to answer this question with a resounding ‘yes,’ and like the narrator, individuals under capitalism have the potential to remake themselves and to create ‘freedom to.’ Each of Palahniuk’s novels is part of a process of trying to imagine ways to

challenge capitalism or escape capitalist rationalities. The fact that he is still working on the same project that he started in the late 1990s illustrates just how difficult it can be to unveil your own society, let alone to write your way to the means of real resistance. While Palahniuk hasn't yet discovered the 'how,' it is clear that his fiction has the potential to serve as a valuable vehicle for not only for unveiling often unquestioned conditions of society but also for encouraging the feelings and thoughts that could pave the way to freedom.

The Petrified World Speaks

As a form of capitalism, the neoliberalism of the twenty-first century retains many of the features observed by theorists of twentieth century capitalism. Just as the capitalism observed by Weber in 1905 imbued human interactions with instrumentality, the neoliberalism of 2019 is a system that encourages people to view both others and themselves as means to economic ends, in a moment that gradually disintegrates both the wider collective and personal relationships while encouraging an individualism that lacks any real individuality. However, despite its similarity to previous iterations of capitalism, theorists such as Brown (2005; 2015) and Dardot and Laval (2013) argue that neoliberalism represents a change in the extent to which society, and people themselves, are ordered by the market logic; something that has far-reaching consequences not only for individuals but for the socio-political institutions that bolster the market in the first place. Generations of humans have now been born and have grown up under the imperatives of neoliberalism, contributing to the feeling that the system is natural, rather than the product of human decisions and actions that could be challenged and thus changed. Another key difference is neoliberalism's ubiquity. As observed by David Harvey (2005) and Wendy Brown (2005), globalisation, the rise of the multi-national and the development of electronic, fluid capital, have all tightened the web of neoliberalism over greater and greater areas of the globe. Considering this, challenging neoliberal capitalism seems a difficult or even impossible task.

Many of the literary commentators discussed in this thesis have turned to Palahniuk's work to find a solution to the knotty problem of neoliberal capitalist subjectivity. However, while I concur with these commentators that Palahniuk's work has a place in the wider project of challenging capitalism, I depart from the prevalent belief that Palahniuk's novels

specifically depict any viable alternative to the capitalist status quo, finding instead that neither his depictions of fringe communities nor his portrayal of non-traditional relationships manage to completely eschew neoliberal capitalist subjectivity.

Arguing that Palahniuk does not portray a blueprint of escape from capitalism for his readers does not preclude finding value in Palahniuk's work. As has been explored throughout this thesis, Palahniuk's novels are important not in their portrayal of the neoliberal capitalist world but in their distortion of it. Closely adhering to the ideas of Herbert Marcuse, this project argued that fiction retains an important role in challenging established ways of being because, "the writer and artist [are able] to call men and things by their name – to name the otherwise unnameable" (1964/2002, p. 251). Fiction does important work in bringing unexamined facets of life out into the open, and even into the reader's consciousness for the first time. Anti-mimetic fiction such as Palahniuk's is a particularly valuable vehicle of this process.

Under contemporary neoliberal capitalism, the contingency of the capitalist system has been obscured, and capitalist rationale has entered the realm of common-sense. Since capitalism appears to many people as natural and inevitable, depicting its processes exactly as they are could result in the mere replication of its inevitability. Thus, the best fiction to challenge contemporary capitalism will *invert* reality rather than simply represent it. That is, it will depict the aspects of our world that we do not usually consider or even notice, magnifying them so that they are unmissable; it will make things that we take for granted appear ridiculous; it will make commonplace actions appear obscene. Most importantly, it will make things that we take as natural appear unnatural and strange, and in doing so paradoxically allow us to see our society more clearly than if it had been portrayed using realism. This kind of fiction improves the subject's ability to think objectively about their

situation and place themselves not only in the wider milieu but in the wider universe. Chuck Palahniuk's fiction is at its best when it is doing all these things.

Chapter two of this thesis explored how one aspect of neoliberal life – Mark Fisher's capitalist realism – both serves to prevent any consistent resistance to the status quo and is unveiled by Palahniuk's fiction. Capitalist realism imbues neoliberalism with a sense of timelessness, planting the subject in an eternal, inevitable present. Reinforcing its appearance of inevitability is neoliberalism's skill in appropriating all alternative narratives, unifying and equalising even the most oppositional of them as market trends. Yet Palahniuk's fiction reveals these mechanisms of capitalist realism to his reader, showing them how a situation understood as inevitable is constructed. Thus, it briefly breaks the spell of capitalist realism by prompting a 'moment of disenchantment' for the reader. Reading anti-mimetic fiction that portrays capitalism can be an important step in breaking through the spell of capitalist realism.

Another aspect of neoliberal capitalist life revealed by Palahniuk's fiction is the lack of deep human connection. Chapter three focused on Palahniuk's extraordinary, offensive characters and their instrumental treatment of others and inability to form enduring friendships. These characters go to great lengths to attain the adulation of an audience, because this adulation feels like human connection to them. These characters predominantly act in absurd, ostensibly overblown and unrealistic ways. However, it is exactly the outrageousness of Palahniuk's characters that creates the conditions for his reader to reflect on their own society, ultimately allowing them to perceive the similarities between their own situations and the experiences of Palahniuk's characters. The similarity between Palahniuk's characters and the capitalist subject can be further understood through Erich Fromm's (1942/2001) observations that capitalism renders people simultaneously independent and

isolated; a dynamic that persists in the contemporary neoliberal capitalism. The capitalist subject has ‘freedom from’ oppressive power structures but, enmeshed as they are in capitalist rationalities, they are not afforded the ‘freedom to’ act outside prescribed ways of being. Trapped in this situation, they continue to resort to instrumental thinking, applying ends-means logic to others, seeking the adulation of an audience and often failing to create true connections.

The novels not only reveal the impact of instrumental reason applied to other people and intimate relationships, they also reveal how under capitalism, humans have come to apply instrumental reason to themselves. The reification of the commodity system, described by Lukács (1923/1971) almost one hundred years ago, makes this system of human action appear to follow natural laws, compelling humans to participate in it. This dynamic has been magnified under neoliberalism so that all aspects of the individual are deployed in the name of selling the self. Chapter four discussed the novels’ depiction of characters who are little more than human enterprises, and societies in which only marketable qualities prevail. They repeatedly portray the situation in which the injunction to sell the self impacts directly on human action, leading to the elimination of uniqueness and any real individuality; Palahniuk’s characters utterly lack the ‘freedom to’ develop outside the imperatives of their society.

Throughout this thesis it is argued that Palahniuk’s characters are larger-than-life caricatures and appear to bear little resemblance to ‘real’ people. However, this is what makes Palahniuk’s work so effective at exploring his society. Marcuse points out that art “has its ground in social reality and is yet its ‘other.’ Art breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experience, a dimension in which human beings, nature, and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality principle” (1977/1978, p. 72). The extraordinary

characters and situations Palahniuk portrays go against the ‘established reality principle’ and unveil the rationality of contemporary neoliberal society, which is normalised and so often seen as inevitable or ‘natural.’

While there was an extant outside to capitalism while Lukács, Marcuse and Fromm were writing, either in the form of different countries and cultures or the Soviet Union, in 2019 there seems to be no outside. This penetration of capitalism into enclaves that were formerly not capitalist, along with the fall of the Soviet Union, has contributed to the sense that neoliberalism is inescapable and even, as described by Harvey (2005), morally right. Capitalism also seems to be able to integrate any challenge into itself; according to Luc Boltanski (2002), even the demands of the 1960s for more flexibility have been integrated into neoliberal capitalism, and what promised to be a new world turned into an even more insidious version of the old. Chapter five utilised the ideas of Boltanski, arguing that the fluidity and constant change depicted in Palahniuk’s novels does not provide any resistance to capitalist norms but, on the contrary, reveals yet another discomfiting mechanism of contemporary capitalism; that is, it requires its subjects to embrace instability and change. On the surface, Palahniuk’s characters enthusiastically adopt and discard identities (which are built through consumer choices). However, at the same time, they yearn for security and stability. This parallels the discomfort of what Zygmunt Bauman (2000) terms ‘Liquid Life,’ the contemporary situation of enforced flexibility and transformation, in which the capitalist must constantly leave behind past iterations of themselves in order to ‘keep up’ with the pace of change.

Having been made visible, the mechanisms of capitalism – capitalist realism, instrumental thinking, reification and the imperative to transform – can thus be called into question. Recognition of the real operation of neoliberal capitalism, as opposed to that

disseminated in the mass media, is an important first step to change. Perhaps this is not the kind of resistance that earlier Marxists had in mind when they discussed how art could be used to challenge capitalism. However, considering how the web of capitalist rationality has tightened around the subject in the intervening years, Palahniuk's work in sharing with the reader "what we wish not to see but perhaps need to" (Angel, 2009, p. 60) serves an important purpose. It reveals how ways of being that seem outrageous on the page are in fact commonplace in twenty-first century neoliberal capitalism, and how even what seem to be the most obvious avenues for resistance must be interrogated to ensure they do not lead to an impasse.

This leads to the second conclusion, which is that Palahniuk's novels can influence his individual reader. While it is in some ways typical that the individualist neoliberal subject – myself – writing within the individualist neoliberal capitalist context would position change as having to occur on the level of individual subjectivity, on the other hand it seems like there is little choice for anyone who wants to challenge capitalism with a view to creating social change. Those activists and theorists who have a vision of a collective society may decry the idea of locating the possibility for change in the subject, but, as argued by Brown (2005) and Dardot and Laval (2013), neoliberal rationality has penetrated so deeply that collective political change is a remote possibility without subjective change. However, the subject of neoliberalism cannot change themselves spontaneously. Creating this subjective change needs to be a collective project, imagined by many thinkers. Transformation will only come from the efforts of many activists, politicians, educators, and, most importantly for this project, artists and writers, whose work all focuses on the same thing: challenging the idea that neoliberal ways of being are natural and revealing them to be contingent on a very specific and historical belief system. Such a project is already happening; the work of theorists such as Dardot and Laval, Fisher, Harvey, Brown and Bauman, attests to it, as does

the work of Palahniuk himself. However, this thesis also suggests that, of all the methods of challenging capitalism, fiction may be one of the most worthwhile in a world in which political discussion is often immediately viciously polarising. Where political activism and theory may find an automatically hostile audience, fiction in all its forms may be more successful in accessing a broader audience. Thus, art, and especially fiction, forms a vital part of this transformative project.

Despite the promise it shows as part of a transformative endeavour, Palahniuk's work is not an unqualified success. Particularly, his attempts to explore specific solutions to the issues caused by contemporary neoliberal capitalism are, despite being lauded by some commentators, one of the weaker aspects of his fiction. Palahniuk's own philosophy of fiction positions it as a "laboratory" (2004, p. 37) and as "training wheels" (2004, p. 38). However, across the novels discussed in this thesis, Palahniuk's characters repeatedly fail to truly break free of their rationality or their society and the communities depicted in the novels almost invariably replicate either the instrumentality or individualism of neoliberalism. Often, Palahniuk's communities are places in which the characters attempt to assuage their own anxieties by utilising others. At times, it is unclear whether these replications were deliberate or whether they point to a failure of imagination. Viewing the communities as the latter, a failure of imagination, is not to detract from the fiction's power or potential. Palahniuk's fiction, this 'laboratory,' does not offer us a blueprint of a new world, but it does enable us to perceive two important things: first, that it is extremely difficult to break free of our neoliberal subjectivity and secondly, that we must be alert to the danger of reproducing the exact conditions that we are trying to overcome, which are so natural to us.

Another thing that Palahniuk's work reveals, perhaps inadvertently, is that even our most ardently imagined means of resistance or transformation can easily be undermined and

thwarted, turned into the reverse of what we imagined. Many on the Left highlight the need for strong relationships and collective solutions, and of course collectivity has been a key tenet for many of the theorists covered in this thesis. However, many of Palahniuk's communities can be read as attempts to escape the discomfort of being alone and independent in a competitive capitalist world through the creation of secondary bonds, whether those are the commonplace secondary bonds of a dysfunctional, consuming relationship, or the secondary bonds of a fascist organisation. Reading Palahniuk against Erich Fromm's work, in particular, highlights that collectivity is not automatically emancipatory or even transgressive. Rather, many subjects of capitalism may seek to relinquish their responsibility for their selves by subscribing to extreme ideologies that give them security and even a sense of power; something that Fromm and others of his generation witnessed first-hand. Viewed through this lens, *Fight Club*'s fascist Project Mayhem appears to be an explicit and deliberate warning of the powerful allure of obliterating the self or being subsumed in a greater whole. With the increasing polarisation of politics, especially in online spaces, and the strong tendency that many commentators on both the Right and the Left demonstrate to identify wholeheartedly with ideology, heeding this warning is crucial. It is the position of this thesis that resistance to capitalism must itself resist the obliteration of the self and the subsequent privileging of ideology, and instead focus on the creation of a new, true individual. An individual, as imagined by Marcuse and Fromm, whose uniqueness is affirmed and who will be able to resist secondary bonds of all kinds.

While Palahniuk's communities are valuable in that they provide a warning of how the unpleasantness of living under capitalism can drive people to seek the security of simplistic ideologies, the moments of death in Palahniuk's novels are valuable in that they have the potential to disrupt the 'routinisation' of capitalist life. As argued by Fromm, the knowledge of death is one of the things that is unsaid and often denied under capitalism,

likely because its reality could challenge the constructed ‘reality’ of capitalism itself. Yet Palahniuk includes graphic, realistic descriptions of death and decay in his novels; indeed, he rarely uses naturalistic writing at any other time apart from when he is describing a dead body or an injury. This contrast, between the exaggerated characters and ridiculous plots of his novels and the realism with which he describes death, seems to very deliberately suggest that while capitalism is contingent there is an unacknowledged real outside of it, of which death is an important part. This suggests that knowledge of death can help inform how one lives their life. Another device that has the potential to create real change is Palahniuk’s open, ambiguous endings. Rather than restoring order, or “swap[ping] a contradictory world for a consistent one” (Brecht, 1949/1964, p. 188). The lived contradictions of capitalist society are not magicked away by a happy ending in Palahniuk’s novels. Instead, Palahniuk leaves his readers with questions and unresolved issues, an open-endedness that potentially contributes to a heightened consciousness of their situation. Such a consciousness can be the precursor to action.

Despite playing a vital role in revealing the mechanisms of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, the relationship between fiction and reality is not straightforward. As illustrated by Mark Fisher’s capitalist realism, fiction must work in a socio-economic landscape that easily subsumes its claims into its logic. At the same time, in order to garner any kind of substantial audience an anti-capitalist novel must operate as a commodity within the very system it tries to challenge. Another complication exists in the author. The authors of fiction that challenges capitalism are themselves subjects of capitalism. Palahniuk is a neoliberal author; a pop-culture celebrity, albeit one who has recently lost a lot of money. His novels collectively represent the continuation across time of an author trying to investigate his world, make it visible, and challenge it. They parallel the unfolding of contemporary neoliberal capitalism as well as the struggle of trying to think outside of it from the inside.

Palahniuk and others like him are not the “great realists” described by Lukács (1938/1977, they are fallible human beings. Palahniuk’s work itself is human; sometimes it is insightful, sometimes it is clumsy, and sometimes it does the opposite to its author’s stated intentions. Palahniuk himself appears to be aware of his own limitations, writing as a single voice. He explains in one interview:

I can't be the person who came up with the idea and be the person who has the answer at the end.

I'm going to have to grow and evolve through the whole process as well. So I accept that struggle, and that there are going to be unpleasant parts in that struggle where I'm just stymied...

(Perry, 2014, para. 37)

Yet this does not make his writing less valuable. Palahniuk’s work, for all its distorted, dysfunctional characters, ridiculous plots and overblown satire, for all its hyperbole and obscenity, has proven relatable to many other subjects of neoliberalism because it emphasises, not the exact intricacies and workings of neoliberalism as someone like Lukács would prefer, but what it can be like to live under this system; the confusion, the insecurity, the dysfunction and the continuous striving.

This is where I want to return to a quote from Brecht that I used in my introduction: “in art there is the fact of failure, and the fact of partial success” (1967/1977, p. 74).

Palahniuk’s body of literature, which he has been working on for almost twenty-five years, is neither success nor failure, but both simultaneously. Furthermore, more importantly than whether his work is success or failure, it is an attempt at tackling the overwhelming context of neoliberal capitalism, part of a wider movement in trying to shift what Brecht referred to as the “field” of possibilities (1949/1964, p. 190).

Adorno and Horkheimer famously referred to reification as a “forgetting” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944, as cited in Marcuse, 1977/1978, p. 73). It is a ‘forgetting’ that the capitalist system is made up of human decisions and actions, it is a forgetting that every day

we choose to perpetuate this system, and it is a forgetting that anything was ever different. Yet an engagement with fiction can help counter this forgetting. As Herbert Marcuse declared: “Art fights reification by making the petrified world speak” (Marcuse, 1977/1978, p. 73). The system may seem total and the obstacles may seem insurmountable, yet Chuck Palahniuk’s fiction reminds us of the absurdity of things that we take as common-sense, that those things that seem inevitable are contingent upon a whole raft of wholly social and human processes and, most importantly, it reminds us that things could be different. As long as fiction still has the capacity to make the petrified world speak, there is still the possibility of transformation. Under neoliberal capitalism, as capitalist realism tightens its hold on the capitalist subject, it remains essential for fiction to enact this work.

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