

Francisco Collado-Rodríguez, ed. 2013. *Chuck Palahniuk. Fight Club, Invisible Monsters, Choke*. London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney: Bloomsbury. viii + 218 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4411-4194-1.

MARTA CEREZO MORENO

Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED)

mcerezo@flog.uned.es

In an interview published on 5 November 2014, Chuck Palahniuk stated that “rather than try to follow current events, my goal is to try and write something new enough that it might possibly lead the culture rather than follow the culture” (Adams 2014, n.p.). The author’s gripping but unsettling fiction explores the limits of human disaffection, pain, cruelty and frailty, aspects which, at face value, may seem paralyzing and not apt to lead cultural transformations. However, in his edition *Chuck Palahniuk. Fight Club, Invisible Monsters, Choke*, Francisco Collado-Rodríguez states that “Palahniuk’s novels can never be read at face value” (4). It is precisely the disconcerting nature of his fiction that can set cultural change in motion through the cathartic impact his narrative has on its reader. His novels are a mosaic of distressing issues that, as Collado-Rodríguez remarks, work as a response to a post-human being which is immersed in a simulated reality in which human commodification and consumption rule (5). Such a convoluted and manifold mosaic is defined by Collado-Rodríguez as “an extensive territory still to be discovered” (7), and that is what this volume intends to do: facilitate a new discovery of Palahniuk’s early fiction. And it succeeds.

Unlike other collections on the author by Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Rubin (2009), Jeffrey Sartain (2009) and Erik M. Grayson (2005) which cover Palahniuk’s initial and later works, this volume centers on and attempts to dissect his early writing alone. The volume is divided into four sections, the first being an introduction where the editor justifies his selection of works by stating that *Fight Club* (1996), *Invisible Monsters* (1999) and *Choke* (2001) “played an essential part in establishing his [Palahniuk’s] status as a cult figure [they] are highly representative of the writer’s particular style and insights” (1). This comprehensive introduction offers the reader a detailed analysis of the narrative articulation of the novels’ transgressive nature and examines how the author’s perception of contemporary US society is shaped by psychoanalysis, post-structuralist theories and the understanding of the self from

a post-humanist perspective. Collado-Rodríguez anticipates the main issues that will be analyzed by the authors of this volume and perceptively presents the three novels as a warning about “the society of the simulacra” (7). The two final sections of this introduction are devoted to a brief mention of Palahniuk’s other novels and nonfiction books. The rest of the volume is appropriately organized so that each novel has its own section comprising three separate chapters and preceded by a pertinent introduction by the editor where, in a very clarifying manner, he presents the main issues addressed by each article at the same time as showing how they complement each other. This wise editorial decision helps the reader to fully immerse him or herself in the disturbing and fascinating universe of each novel. Thus the volume offers nine contributions by reputed academics that provide a variety of innovative ways to analyze Palahniuk’s novels.

The first article of part one, focused on *Fight Club*, is entitled “Violence, Spaces, and a Fragmenting Consciousness in *Fight Club*” by James R. Giles. Its five sections guide the reader into an insightful analysis of the narrator’s self-hatred and disintegrating personality as a result of, first, a Freudian conflict with his absent father, second, his complicity in his capitalist, exploitive and inhuman job, and, third, his obsession with death. These conflicts lead to the narrator’s fear of emasculation which he tries to transcend through the Fight Club, envisioned by Giles as a “new faith rooted in aggression” and irrationality intended to impose order on his world, which is inevitably “doomed to fail” (27). Giles makes an appealing analysis of homoeroticism in relation to Girard’s notion of reciprocal violence and the sacrificial victim and a perceptive analysis of Bataille’s ([1957] 1986) binary of excess and reason as an appropriate theoretical framework with which to analyze the narrator’s ineffectual attempts to control his own disintegration. Giles’ spatial analysis of the novel in the light of Lefebvre’s (1991) theories sheds light on the crucial interrelation of fantasy and reality and leads to a stimulating description of the merging of the beginning and end of the novel where, ironically, the narrator tries to escape death by embracing it.

In “The Avatars of Masculinity: How Not to Be a Man,” Eduardo Mendieta envisions *Fight Club* as a deconstruction of American masculinity through its frontal critique of consumerism, empty eroticism, anachronistic militarism and the resulting socio-spiritual emptiness for which the novel presents no remedy. Mendieta regards Tyler Durden as a parodic Nietzschean *overman* intended to promote moral transformation through a rejection of social servility. Mendieta’s inspirational application of the sociological theory of social trust leads to a sharp analysis of how Palahniuk’s novel reveals and fights against the male docility that social acts of reliance imply. The article presents an enthralling analysis of social outrage and Project Mayhem’s disruption of social trust as attempts to achieve social repair.

In “Body Contact: Acting Out is the Best Defense in *Fight Club*,” Laurie Vickroy presents a stimulating analysis of the effects of trauma on the novel’s protagonist

as the materialization of a dehumanized and alienated capitalist society and split and shifting postmodern identities. Vickroy examines the protagonist's "gendered-inflicted shame" (62) and his refusal to acknowledge his dissociative psychic split. She focuses on the narrator's defense mechanisms, such as psychic fragmentation, dissociation, suppression of memory, violence and self-mutilation which, far from having a healing effect, help the protagonist act out his traumatic past experiences. Of particular interest is the confrontation Vickroy establishes between Tyler and Marla in relation to the narrator's psyche and the insights that portray Marla as his savior since she helps him to advance from a state of isolation to self-consciousness and emotional intimacy.

In part two, and basing his analysis on Freud's "Family Romances" ([1909] 2003), Andrew Slade, in "*Invisible Monsters* and Palahniuk's Perverse Sublime," conceives the novel as a reappropriation of the family romance. To Slade, this is a novel about the fluidity of identity, about the problematic nature of the search for identities that differ from those imposed by familial relations and expectations. In his view, Shane and Shannon strive to find "a sense of authentic existence" (82) that can free them from familial restrictions, but which, however, is unattainable. He applies the ambivalence of defense and aggression in Lacan's (2006) specular account to the analysis of the characters' conflictive search for their identities within a stable traditional familial structure against which they rebel. Taking disavowal as his starting point, Slade's analysis of the way Shannon uses Brandy Alexander as a sublime fetish in her path to reach authenticity is original and fascinating.

In "The Opposite of a Miracle: Trauma in *Invisible Monsters*," Richard Viskovic and Eluned Summers-Bremner consider that apparent trauma—materialized in the characters' self-inflicted ordeals—is at the center of the narrative and leads the reader to find out the nature of the characters' real and concealed suffering. The article cleverly reveals the discontinuous and reverse structure of the novel based on a gradual revelation of genuine painful events and on the characters' attempts to escape from their past in order to reinvent their future and transform themselves into artificial and alienated products of consumption. The authors present an incisive analysis of what could be considered an apparent reversal of the ethics of trauma testimony and of the relationship between the grieving subject and his/her recipient in Shannon's delivery of Brandy's daunting story, which ultimately, however, has healing effects and dismantles disconnection.

Liberation from a traumatic past, healing, connection, an emphasis on consumerism, artificiality, simulation, concealment and detachment are also important aspects of Sonia Baelo-Allué's "From Solid to Liquid: *Invisible Monsters* and the Blank Fiction Road Story." Baelo-Allué aptly analyzes the novel within the framework of blank fiction in combination with the road story genre and presents a convincing argument based on the cogent metaphor of liquid identities and pervaded by a well-grounded ethical undertone. For the author, the road is a female space of subversion, freedom and also of liquidity, of changing identities, self-discovery and

an ethical connection with the other. Baelo-Allué concludes that the end of the novel highlights the ambiguous nature of blank fiction novels: through Shane/Brandy the novel finally points to artificiality and solidity as the only means of social integration, and, through Shannon, it proclaims fluidity and the necessary rejection of a society of consumption and appearances.

Jesse Kavadlo's "Chuck Palahniuk's Edible Complex" opens part three. Kavadlo starts his analysis of *Choke* by noting the multiple, complementary and also contradictory meanings of the term "choke" and puts forth an original reading of the power of narrative to define selfhood and shape relationships with others in a novel where the postmodern dialectic between simulation and reality is also at work. Referentiality turns into a central aspect of this perceptive article that envisions the novel as a self-consuming artifact in which contradiction and ambiguity are fundamental. Kavadlo engagingly points out how the stylistic aspects of the novel reinforce the sense of narrative deferral and the character's impasse and blockage. To Kavadlo, the rewriting and reversal of the Oedipal story plays a founding role in a novel where narrative entrapment and concealment gives way to final release and self-revelation through the protagonist's remembering that he can author his own story.

In "Anger, Anguish, and Art: *Choke*" David Cowart demonstrates admirable erudition through his comprehensive intertextual analysis of Palahniuk's work. He reflects on the role of authenticity, simulation and suspension of meaning in a novel that finally "return[s] to the rhetoric of sincerity" (174) in opposition to modern and postmodern irony. He explores in depth individual and collective alienation in the novel as well as the postmodern concept of history, which he links to a compelling analysis of Colonial Dunsboro and simulacrum. Cowart also points to the novel's psychological doubling and notion of alterity reflected in its use of first and third persons and in the construction of the mother figure. As in Kavadlo's, this chapter highlights the relationship the novel establishes between storytelling and self-constitution, the arrested nature of the protagonist, the reversal of the Oedipus complex and the character's absurd identification with Christ, which emphasizes the interplay between death and salvation. Cowart finishes by looking into the seismic destruction of Denny's wall as a reflection of a need to rebuild a new world in which perception can, however, be deceptive.

The last chapter of the book, "Addiction in *Choke*" by Nieves Pascual, claims that "male-male sodomy is the concealed arch-addiction" (173). Drawing on Freud's theories, she points to the central role narcissism plays in *Choke* as a psychological defense against parental absence. Pascual considers pornography to be Victor's mechanism to fight against his reality and analyzes the imbrication in the novel between empowerment and acceptance of powerlessness, Freud's process of identification, the reversal of the Oedipus complex and homoeroticism. Pascual presents a thought-provoking analysis of the parallelism between choking to death and autoerotic asphyxia and of the parodic merging of Victor and the pornographic monkey in religious and evolutionist terms.

She develops captivating insights on the interconnection between castration, anorexia, pregnancy, the *vagina dentata*, abortion, the womb fantasy and male reproduction which shed new light on the novel's multifarious angles. Addiction is related to simulacrum by Pascual, who, like other authors in this volume, points to the overwhelming presence in Palahniuk's work of the dynamics between artificiality and truth, between the copy and the model. Finally, and drawing on Halpern's (2002) idea that "the textual is sexual" (Pascual 190), Pascual refers to the relevance of three textual strategies in the presentation of the protagonist's concealed desire for the male body: repetition, mutilation and orality.

In a very recent essay, Palahniuk states that he loves plot twists since they reflect "hidden aspects of reality that suddenly force you to reevaluate your history and identity" (2015, n.p.). The penetrating and revealing aspects dealt with in the nine articles of this now indispensable volume on Palahniuk's early writing anatomize those hidden aspects of reality that are at play in his three novels and contribute to the author's objective of making his readers reassess their inner and outer worlds. In this sense, this volume actively and adequately participates in Palahniuk's intention to "lead the culture."

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Marta Cerezo Moreno is Associate Professor of English Studies at the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED). Her main areas of interest and main publications focus, first, on contemporary English narrative in relation to Gender Studies, Literary Gerontology and Disability Studies, and, second, on Early Modern British literature, especially Shakespearean drama. Her current research is concerned with both the presence of aging and disability in contemporary English narrative and the commemorative acts of Shakespeare's quatercentenary.

Address: Departamento de Filologías Extranjeras y sus Lingüísticas. Facultad de Filología. Edificio de Humanidades. Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED). Paseo Senda del Rey, 7. 28040, Madrid, Spain. Tel.: +34 913988182.