

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

Francisco Collado-Rodríguez, ed.

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Francisco Collado-Rodríguez's edited collection of essays on Chuck Palahniuk's fiction adds to the growing academic interest in the writer's work and, following on from likeminded compendiums published by Cynthia Kuhn & Lace Rubin and by Jeffrey Sartain in 2009, intends to broaden the focus of earlier studies which gave almost exclusive attention to Palahniuk's debut novel, *Fight Club* (1996). Although the three essays that constitute Part I of Collado-Rodríguez's collection are still dedicated to exploring the now well-trodden path of *Fight Club* analysis, the editor opens up and simultaneously demarcates the scope of the discussion by focusing an equal number of essays on Palahniuk's 1999 work, *Invisible Monsters* (Part II) and his fourth novel from 2001, *Choke* (Part III). Such a concentration of attention on Palahniuk's early fiction makes sense—in fact, Collado-Rodríguez insists that the three novels chosen for study are “highly representative of the writer's particular style and insights” (1)—and yet the absence of any commentaries dedicated to *Survivor* (1999), Palahniuk's second published work, seems rather anomalous. Indeed, *Survivor* is something of an elephant in the room, its omission never explained by Collado-Rodríguez, who only comments that it “garnered acclaim among readers and critics, helping to reinforce Palahniuk's position in the category of cult writer” (2).

James R. Giles's essay “Violence, Spaces, and a Fragmenting Consciousness in *Fight Club*” explores the narrator's problematic identity in relation to the Oedipal

Complex, a theme that has already received critical attention in the work of Paul J. Kennett (2005), and René Girard's notion of "sacred violence". Although there is nothing particularly innovative about these conceptual anchors, Giles goes on to consider the importance of narrative space in the novel, utilising Henri Lefebvre's Marxist reading to enhance his understanding of how *Fight Club* displays a great deal of "spatial complexity" (39). This is a worthwhile idea and Giles provides an interesting analysis of how physical and mental or fantasised spaces operate in the novel.

In the second chapter, "The Avatars of Masculinity: How Not to be a Man", Eduardo Mendieta draws on a range of philosophical concepts, from Nietzsche's *Übermensch* to Plato's cave, in order to explore the idea that *Fight Club*'s narrator is a parodic Zarathustra, a false American prophet for the consumer age. Despite being flawed by frequent typing mistakes and occasional banality —"who is... 'everyman'?" Mendieta asks at one point, before answering "Everyman is everyone" (52)— the essay offers some insights into the problematic nature of modern masculinity as elaborated in Palahniuk's fiction.

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According to Laurie Vickroy in "Body Contact: Acting Out is the Best Defense in *Fight Club*", trauma is a key element which manifests itself thematically and at the level of narrative throughout Palahniuk's first novel. In a highly engaging reading, she suggests that trauma is fundamentally problematic from the perspective of stereotypical masculinity as it "necessitates acknowledging helplessness" (61-62). Rather than doing so, Tyler Durden becomes a way for the narrator to "act out", as opposed to accepting, his traumatic experiences. Furthermore, Vickroy argues that the unstable and shifting identities created by Palahniuk not only indicate the fragmented nature of postmodern male subjectivity but are also symptomatic of the dehumanisation so prevalent in contemporary existence.

Part II begins with Andrew Slade's innovative reading of Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters* by suggesting that it exemplifies the "perverse sublime" (81). Drawing on Freudian and Lacanian theory, Slade contends that the search for authenticity is a key element of this and other works by Palahniuk and it is precisely its lack in *Invisible Monsters*, as manifested in Shannon McFarland's obsession with her transgender brother, that points to how fetishism may become elevated to "the grandeur of the sublime" (86).

Echoing the earlier chapter by Vickroy, Richard Viskovic and Eluned Summers-Bremner focus their interpretation of *Invisible Monsters* on the issue of trauma and suggest an important connection between traumatic events and "the alienation and inauthenticity of modern life" (113). The authors make a key observation when they comment on how the discontinuity of Palahniuk's narrative foregrounds the lived experience of trauma from the perspective of the suffering subject.

Furthermore, they argue that the ambiguity of Shane's possible abuse by his father is a central narrative device which gestures towards the true nature of (unremembered/unspoken) trauma.

In the final essay on Palahniuk's third novel, Sonia Baelo-Allué offers an inventive consideration of *Invisible Monsters* from the point of view of genre, suggesting that it can be read as an unconventional hybrid between blank fiction and road story. Building upon the previous discussion of trauma, Baelo-Allué argues that the narrator's detached expression of her "fragmented...broken and chaotic life" (123) is typical of blank fiction's narrative disconnectedness and its focus on the alienation of modern consumer culture. She continues by suggesting that, as befitting a novel concerned with the search for identity, Palahniuk utilises the conventions of the traditional American road story but also, ultimately, subverts them when Shannon accepts the fundamental instability of her subjectivity, "a liquid, fluid sense of self" (134).

Part III of the collection focuses on Palahniuk's 2001 novel, *Choke*, and all three contributors draw upon the author's rewriting of the Oedipal Complex as a key theoretical concept on which to base their analyses. The first of these, Jesse Kavadlo's "Chuck Palahniuk's Edible Complex", considers the use of repetition as a key narrative device to indicate Victor's ontological blockage (as manifested in his repeated choking). Indeed, Kavadlo believes that *Choke* is deeply concerned with the act of narration itself through its construction, manipulation and transformation of the protagonist's identity.

Writing in "Anger, Anguish and Art: *Choke*", David Cowart attempts to locate Palahniuk's text in a cultural context that is both contemporaneous and historical. Providing a dizzying array of references to everything from Pliny the Elder to Wile E. Coyote, which often appears to be straining to be a little too knowing, he argues that *Choke* anticipates "a return to the rhetoric of sincerity" (174) that would be ushered in with the events of 9/11. However, despite its occasional pretentious excesses, Cowart's article provides an interesting analysis of the symbolic role of Dunsboro, the historical theme park where Victor works in the novel.

In the final essay on *Choke*, Nieves Pascual forwards an interesting reading based on Freudian theory to suggest that sodomy is the unspoken, narrative "hole" (176) at the centre of Victor's story. She argues that this unrepresented act is not only prevalent in the text's use of metaphors —its frequent references to ingestion for example— but also at the level of narrative through the use of devices such as repetition, condensation and fragmentation. Indeed, for Pascual, "sodomy is the text's ultimate signifier" (192), despite the fact that *Choke* never overtly engages with the issue of Victor's homosexuality.

Collado-Rodríguez's collection of critical essays adds further depth to the literature on Palahniuk's work that has developed since the millennium by providing a series of analyses that are linked by their common concern for themes such as trauma, identity and postmodern aesthetics. Although perhaps of particular interest to those with a psychoanalytical bent, at their best, many of the articles in this collection provide dynamic readings of *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters* and *Choke* which further the case for viewing Palahniuk as a writer of serious literary merit despite the controversy that many of these novels attract.

Works cited

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