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‘We all end up mutilated’: Bodily destruction and self-mutilation in the first three novels by Chuck Palahniuk

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Abstract

In this essay, I explore the motifs of bodily destruction and self-mutilation in the first three novels of American author Chuck Palahniuk: *Fight Club* (1996), *Survivor* (1999) and *Invisible Monsters* (1999). These motifs are prevalent throughout the author's work and are particularly noteworthy in how detailed and graphic the novels are. In analysing the ways in which the characters of these novels engage in a variety of different self-destructive and self-mutilating behaviours, I seek to identify the thematic significance and narrative purpose of self-mutilation in Chuck Palahniuk's work. I argue that, by engaging in fist fights, excessive exercise, use of steroids, suicide, extensive plastic surgery and deliberate facial disfigurement, the characters are reckoning with identity, agency and determinism. For these characters, I conclude, self-mutilation can be either a result of their helplessness and lack of agency, or a way to assert their own agency and identity.

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, American author Chuck Palahniuk has published a number of graphically violent and darkly comedic novels and short stories. A particularly noteworthy and pervasive motif within Palahniuk's body of work is the destruction of the human body; Palahniuk's characters both suffer and inflict extreme acts of bodily violence upon themselves.

In this essay, I will examine the motifs of bodily destruction and self-mutilation in the first three novels published by Chuck Palahniuk: *Fight Club* (1996), *Survivor* (1999) and *Invisible Monsters* (1999). As his first three novels, they established the themes and stylistic tendencies that have remained remarkably consistent throughout his body of work. They also display the motifs of bodily destruction, self-mutilation, and self-harm in a variety of different ways: through seeking out and welcoming violence from others, through suicidal ideation and suicidal practice, and through the extremes of slavishly pursuing an ideal appearance and violently rejecting that same appearance. Using examples from the novels themselves, as well as previous scholarly writing on Palahniuk's work, I will specifically explore how self-harm is used as a means for the characters to regain some sense of bodily autonomy and agency, and to facilitate their reinvention and self-fashioning. This aim, in turn, gives rise to a number of questions. What types of self-harm and self-mutilation can be found in these works? Are they identified as such by the narrator or protagonist? What are the motivations behind these acts, and what are the intended effects? Do these self-destructive acts serve a narrative function, occurring as part of a daily routine, or are they performed more sparingly, and/or to a more severe degree?

2. Background

Palahniuk's work has been interpreted and analysed through a variety of theoretical lenses. His writing style has been described as 'teratological' or 'transgressional', relying on graphic language, sarcastic repetition of slogans and mantras, and 'aggressive self-negation to provoke reader response' (Sondergard 12; Dunn 49). From the very beginning of each novel, the reader is made painfully aware that the protagonists have little control over their own fates, chaotically spiralling towards their own self-destruction (Sondergard 12-13). Palahniuk simultaneously entertains notions of free will and determinism, leaving the reader wondering whether the

characters' acts of self-destruction are self-inflicted, or an inevitable consequence of their situation and culture. In this section of the thesis, I aim to provide an overview of the scholarly work that currently exists pertaining to themes of self-destruction and self-mutilation in Palahniuk's work, as well as outline what I intend to add to the scholarly discourse.

Kjersti Jacobsen has explored discourses of gender in the novels *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters*, arguing that 'the characters challenge the normative notions of gender and seek to confront, destroy and distort them through the acts of self-mutilation, self-destruction and pain' (93). Self-destruction not only allows the characters to permanently eschew normative labels, identities, and bodily ideals, Jacobsen argues, but is also represented as 'the only means of achieving an authentic identity in postmodern American society' (93).

Andrew Ng has expressed similar arguments in his exploration of the tropes of self-destruction and deformity in *Invisible Monsters*. According to Ng, the characters of the novel 'perform violence upon their own bodies as a desperate resort to experience "aliveness"' (24). Ng argues that 'it is only by "turning monstrous" that subjects may be able to redeem their identity from a culture saturated with constructed and over-determined semblances of self' (24). I will further explore this notion of self-fashioning and transcendence through bodily transgression later in this essay.

Sidney L. Sondergard writes that Palahniuk's characters 'come to see suffering and tribulation as the necessary preconditions for life-affirming changes, and their painfully recurrent presence in his novels indicates they are equally central to his own creative vision' (14). Drawing comparisons with how Charles Dickens and William Shakespeare write villainous characters, Sondergard observes that 'Palahniuk delivers deeply flawed characters to his readers, then immerses his charismatic losers in crises that superficially seem to reinforce their shortcomings before pushing them to the point of a Kirkegaardian, change-or-die decision' (15).

Representing a different perspective, Coco d'Hont has analysed *Fight Club* through the lens of political theory, arguing that the novel 'dissects and complicates the ideological explorations of freedom as a central social value by neoliberal theorists [... using] the mutilated body of its protagonist to illustrate the discrepancy between theory and practice' (169).

Palahniuk's use of self-mutilation as a means of not only achieving a unique identity, but even transcendence, has perhaps most thoroughly been explored by Andrew Slade in his essay *On Mutilation: The Sublime Body of Chuck Palahniuk's Fiction*. In Palahniuk's novels, Slade proposes, self-mutilation offers a path to rebirth: 'Violence in Palahniuk's texts is a vehicle to get us to think through what might emerge beyond violence, on the other side of a cultural climate where our existence is more a simulacrum of experience. In this world, pain becomes a way into the experience of authentic pleasures' (66). Only 'through self-mutilation can a real life emerge from the artifice of labels' (70-71). In place of blatant fatalism, Palahniuk's 'postmodern sublime' offers the optimistic promise 'that beyond mutilation a new horizon for existence will appear in which an authentic existence, a real life, becomes a reality' (71).

Finally, G. Christopher Williams has interrogated the conflicting themes of nihilism and Buddhism in Palahniuk's works, particularly concerning negation of the Self and 'self-annihilation as the means to self-enlightenment' (71).

In this thesis, I will perform a comprehensive analysis of the themes of self-destruction and self-mutilation in Chuck Palahniuk's work, more specifically in his first three novels. I will look at how such themes shape the worldviews of the novels' characters and explore in what ways these novels thematically align with (as well as differ from) each other. While *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters* have previously been examined in some detail, comparatively little has been written about *Survivor*, especially as pertains to Palahniuk's consistent themes of self-destruction. Consequently, I aim to show that *Survivor* has its own distinct approach to these themes that, when viewed together with the other two novels, adds more nuance to the integral significance that these themes have in Palahniuk's work as a whole.

The different portrayals of self-harm and self-mutilation in the three novels share certain commonalities. They all concern the destruction or mutilation of the body (but are also often accompanied by self-destructive mental tendencies, in the form of self-destructive thought patterns, extensive self-hatred, etc). They are not merely self-destructive for the sake of self-destruction, but serve as a means to achieve certain ends — whether metamorphosis, rebirth, to adapt to (or reject) societal ideals, to feel alive, to feel connected to other people, etc. It is clear that these acts are not merely intended to modify the body, but also by extension to modify the person's identity.

These modes of self-harm and self-mutilation all require active participation (excessive exercise, shooting oneself, physical fighting), rather than passive (such as neglecting one's health, refusing to eat, not taking care of one's appearance, etc). On the other hand, whereas some of the self-destructive acts have very permanent effects (shooting yourself in the face, extreme gender reassignment surgery and cosmetic surgery), others require a certain upkeep — most physical wounds acquired in *Fight Club* would eventually heal, extreme physical fitness would decrease if the regimen was abandoned, and Botox only lasts for a few months. While many of these forms of self-mutilation (as part of explicit self-harm, suicide, or physical assault) are considered abnormal in modern society, others (Orthorexia nervosa, pathological over-exercising, extreme reliance on various dietary supplements and enhancements, doping, extreme cosmetic surgery) are often actively encouraged by societal norms and beauty ideals.

3. Analysis

3.1 *Fight Club* (1996)

‘I just don’t want to die without a few scars’ (*Fight Club*, 48).

This sentiment is expressed by the narrator of *Fight Club*, as a way of justifying his beaten and bruised appearance to his boss. He is actually echoing the words of Tyler Durden, his supposed best friend, at the time of their first fight in the parking lot of a local bar (*FC* 52). At Tyler’s initiative, he and the narrator have now formed a fight club as an outlet for male aggression. The fact that the narrator has so readily adopted Tyler’s rationale for violence and self-destruction is an early sign of Tyler’s influence; by the end of the novel, Tyler’s ideas on self-worth, self-improvement and self-destruction will have spread to a seemingly endless number of directionless men. The narrator is not merely Tyler’s first disciple; in reality, Tyler is a figment of his imagination, as well as his alter ego, and as Tyler’s influence grows, the narrator fears that he is in danger of being erased completely, of being fully replaced by his more forceful persona (*FC* 174). In this section of the thesis, I will examine the ways in which *Fight Club* explores bodily self-destruction as a means of rejecting societal expectations and asserting one’s identity, as well as how these self-destructive behaviours threaten to ultimately destroy the narrator’s identity entirely.

At an early point in the novel, the narrator finds some old magazines where ‘there’s a series of articles where organs in the human body talk about themselves in the first person: I am Jane’s Uterus. I am Joe’s Prostate’ (*FC* 58). He immediately adopts this concept as a way of commenting on his own emotions while remaining detached from them, making his organs a synecdoche for his real thoughts: ‘I am Joe’s Raging Bile Duct. [...] I am Joe’s Grinding Teeth. I am Joe’s Inflamed Flaring Nostrils. [...] I am Joe’s White Knuckles. [...] I am Joe’s Enraged, Inflamed Sense of Rejection’ (*FC* 59-60). The parallels to Tyler are clear: just as his ‘raging bile duct’ is imbued with sentience and made to absorb or express his feelings for him, Tyler is essentially a part of ‘Joe’¹ that has refused to remain an abstraction.

Although he allows Tyler to guide his actions in ever more violent and dangerous directions, Joe’s own reflections on what he is gaining at fight club² are, in a way, more practical than philosophical. He has been plagued by insomnia, and desperately searching for a way to alleviate it, to attain some state of acceptance or contentment or peace. He tried to find this state within the materialistic, with his apartment and furniture, which failed (*FC* 44). He found it for a time by visiting various support groups for the terminally ill, which made him feel more alive than ever before (*FC* 22); posing as a dying man, he found freedom in being able to weep openly with strangers (*FC* 22). He was comforted by what he viewed as ‘the amazing miracle of death’; ‘the proof that one day you’re thinking and hauling yourself around, and the next, you’re cold fertilizer, worm buffet’ (*FC* 35). However, when Marla Singer, a woman who, like Joe, is pretending to be suffering from terminal illnesses, intrudes on the support groups, her presence is a constant reminder of his own dishonesty, and he once again begins to suffer from insomnia (*FC* 23). After meeting Tyler, Joe finds what he is looking for in fight club. ‘You aren’t alive anywhere like you’re alive at fight club’ (*FC* 51); ‘Nothing was solved when the fight was over, but nothing mattered’ (*FC* 53). He finds fulfilment in fight club like nowhere else. He has a hole in his cheek and can wiggle half the teeth in his jaw, and yet; ‘Maybe self-improvement isn’t the answer. [...] Maybe self-destruction is the answer’ (*FC* 49).

¹ While the narrator’s real name is never made explicit in the novel, his continued use of ‘Joe’ as a shorthand to explore his own emotions makes the name a useful substitute. For the sake of clarity and simplicity, I will therefore be referring to the narrator as ‘Joe’ for the remainder of this thesis.

² The text generally refers to “fight club” without the definite article; for consistency between any quotations used and my own text, I have chosen to do the same.

Joe has been so desperate for any kind of guidance that he invents a persona who will be able to tear him down and then build him back up again. When he finds that his apartment has exploded, his immediate response is to call Tyler, whom he has only ‘met’ once; he has already made up his mind that Tyler is who he wants to be, and he is hoping that Tyler will ‘deliver’ him from ever being ‘perfect and complete’ (*FC* 46).

Tyler pushes a philosophy built around self-destruction. He initially says that he wants to fight Joe because he wants to know more about himself (*FC* 52). He maintains that through fighting, people learn more about themselves; self-destruction is how you achieve enlightenment. He identifies a generation of men with no prospects, who feel abandoned because they failed to achieve the fortune and fame and the kind of happiness that they have been promised by the media they were raised on. Through fight club, Tyler sets out to spread his philosophy; to ensure that his message of self-knowledge through violence is received, anyone attending fight club for the first time *has* to fight (*FC* 122). Before long, it has become impossible to keep track of how many members fight club has amassed across the country.

In time, Tyler’s philosophy begins to expand: he believes that enlightenment can only be achieved by ‘hitting bottom’ (*FC* 70). Therefore, he sets out to tear Joe’s life apart; he encourages Joe to ‘run from self-improvement’ and ‘toward disaster’ (*FC* 70), to embrace the inevitability of death, because ‘only after you lose everything [...] you’re free to do anything’ (*FC* 70). As a step towards this end goal, Tyler severely burns Joe’s hand with lye; he lectures him on the importance of human sacrifice and urges him to ‘Come back to the pain’. As Joe attempts guided meditation to escape the pain, Tyler tells him to embrace it instead, calling it the ‘greatest moment of our lives’. Once Tyler is satisfied that Joe has absorbed his message, he relieves the pain, and Joe is, ostensibly, ‘one step closer to hitting bottom’ (*FC* 73-78).

Tyler, the alter ego, expresses his affection by tearing Joe down. He continually pushes Joe towards change, encouraging him to know himself, to find enlightenment; essentially, to become more like Tyler. This is self-harm as self-care, self-mutilation as self-improvement. However, the line between self-improvement and self-annihilation is arguably blurred: it remains somewhat ambiguous whether Tyler intends for Joe to *become* Tyler, basically merging their personalities, or if he wishes to ultimately *replace* Joe, erasing him completely.

A complication to Joe and Tyler's coexistence is Marla, who has managed to remain in Joe's orbit. After a half-hearted suicide attempt, she begins sleeping with Tyler (*FC* 59), much to the chagrin of Joe (who is as unaware as Marla that 'Tyler' and 'Joe' are two different personalities in one body), as his feelings about Marla vacillate between resentful attraction (*FC* 56), grudging affection (*FC* 106), and utter disdain (*FC* 59). Marla stubs cigarettes out on her arm, claiming to be embracing her 'own festering diseased corruption' (*FC* 65); this possibly inspires Tyler to burn Joe's hand, as this happens only a few pages later. However, unlike Tyler, Marla appears to have little interest in knowing herself or attaining some sense of spiritual freedom; as with her suicide attempt, Marla's self-harm seems primarily motivated by a desire for attention and sympathy.

Concurrently with Tyler's growing influence in the world, Joe also starts to become more like him: he beats himself in front of his boss in order to blackmail him (*FC* 116-117), and he kidnaps and threatens to murder a stranger unless he starts pursuing his neglected life goals (*FC* 151-155). One night at fight club, he picks out a newcomer with 'an angel's face' and beats him mercilessly: 'I held the face of mister angel like a baby or a football in the crook of my arm and [...] bashed him until his teeth broke through his lips. Until the skin was pounded thin across his cheekbones and turned black' (*FC* 122-124). He is seething with rage at the entire world, 'in a mood to destroy something beautiful' (*FC* 122), and so he makes 'mister angel face' answer for everything that he feels is irretrievably and hopelessly lost: 'I wanted to destroy everything beautiful I'd never have. [...] I wanted the whole world to hit bottom' (*FC* 123-124). While Joe's savage beating of 'mister angel face' is essentially an act of rage and despondency, his embrace of such extreme violence also leads to a reversal of influence: Tyler finds his actions inspiring, deciding that the time has now come to escalate their activities (*FC* 123).

By forming Project Mayhem, a mixture of a terrorist organisation and a boys' club, Tyler expands his ambitions once again: in addition to self-destruction, the goal will now be 'the complete and right-away destruction of civilization' (*FC* 125). He is still working from the same premise: only by losing everything and hitting bottom can people, and society as a whole, be improved. Any applicants to Project Mayhem must first endure three days without food, shelter or encouragement before they are admitted; Tyler is breaking their spirits, in order to remould them as he sees fit (*FC* 129-134). As Andrew Ng states: 'the entire trajectory of the fight club is to debunk the myth of individual uniqueness so that the notion of self may be

reduced to mere nothing in order for the self to start over again, this time unfettered by the culture industry' (Ng 28-29). Williams, meanwhile, likens Tyler's hazing of applicants to the process of gaining admittance to Buddhist temples. He writes that Tyler's denial of the self does resemble Buddhist practices, but he also notes that, 'embedded within this denial is a tendency towards self-destruction' (Williams 173). In much the same way as with his applicants, Tyler wishes to topple civilisation and build something new from the ashes. It is not enough to simply reject modern society; it must be destroyed, lest one gives in to the temptation to return to it.

As Project Mayhem's activities continue to grow and spiral out of control, Tyler disappears, leaving Joe feeling abandoned (*FC* 134). However, the initiates of Project Mayhem continue to preach the gospel of Tyler Durden. During a car ride in which the driver deliberately drives into oncoming traffic while relaying the pillars of Project Mayhem philosophy, Joe appears to finally have hit bottom. He attempts to cause a fatal car crash, claiming that he wants to die, that he is 'nothing in the world compared to Tyler' (*FC* 146). After the drive ends in a (non-fatal) crash, the driver tells Joe that he has just had a 'near-life experience' (*FC* 148).

According to Williams, Palahniuk's characters adopt a philosophy of 'destruction and self-dismantling behavior' as a result of their fears that 'nothing may be true', citing Tyler's instructions to deliberately instigate and then lose a fight, as well as Joe's vicious destruction of 'mister angel face' as examples (Williams 172). The problem with this viewpoint, however, is that Tyler's rhetoric is actually centred around God to a surprising extent. He claims that they are "God's middle children [...] with no special place in history and no special attention. Unless we get God's attention, we have no hope of damnation or redemption' (*FC* 141). As Friedrich Nietzsche says in his aphorism on 'The morality of human suffering', since cruelty 'belongs among the oldest festive pleasures of humankind', then perhaps god, or 'the gods', 'are also refreshed and festively disposed whenever one presents them with the sight of cruelty' (Nietzsche 2011: 18). Whether God approves of you or condemns you, he will, at the very least, take notice; 'Which is worse, hell or nothing? Only if we're caught and punished can we be saved' (*FC* 141). It is better to be punished than to be ignored. As long as God sees you, salvation is possible. Ultimately, the means do not really matter, so long as the desired outcome, God's attention, is achieved. Therefore, Tyler's actions are arguably not a nihilistic response to the idea that 'nothing is true' (Williams 172), but are instead based around the idea, or at least the *hope*, that some higher power is going to take notice of this existential temper tantrum.

As Joe finally realises the truth about who Tyler Durden really is, he chooses to reject him, to attempt to stop him before he can do any more damage (*FC* 175). He goes to fight club and signs up for fifty consecutive fights (*FC* 199). What better way to challenge Tyler than to embrace the code he lives by? Joe puts Tyler's philosophy to the test, by taking its core idea – the benefits of self-destruction – to its utmost extreme. Fight after fight, he completely submits to self-destruction:

the guy [...] rams the hole in my cheek into the concrete floor until my teeth inside snap off and plant their jagged roots into my tongue. [...] My collarbone on one side, I hear it snap. [...] Number three [...] hammers my face [...] Until my teeth bite through the inside of my cheek. Until the hole in my cheek meets the corner of my mouth, the two run together into a ragged leer that opens from under my nose to under my ear. Number three pounds until his fist is raw. Until I'm crying. [...] One more punch and my teeth click shut on my tongue. Half of my tongue drops to the floor and gets kicked away. (*FC* 199-201)

When Tyler finally reappears, it is clear that for all the abuse he has suffered, Joe has been unsuccessful in hindering Tyler's plans: 'Tyler's standing there, perfectly handsome and an angel in his everything-blond way. [...] Me, I'm a bloody tissue sample dried on a bare mattress' (*FC* 202). Here, the romanticised ideals of Tyler's philosophy of violence have been completely severed from the gritty reality of the violence itself: Tyler is completely unchanged, while Joe alone has to bear the physical toll of the violence inflicted upon him.

Tyler is undeterred by Joe's display of self-destruction. As his plans near fruition, he decides that the time has come for Joe's 'martyrdom thing' (*FC* 203); going down in flames as the skyscrapers topple and society crumbles around them. Joe has undeniably embraced self-destruction, he has unquestionably hit bottom, and now all that remains for him is suicide, the ultimate act of self-destruction; 'Not like death as a sad, downer thing, this was going to be death as a cheery, empowering thing [...] A real opera of a death, that's what you're going to get' (*FC* 203). He has to complete his journey by being immortalised, forever remaining the subversive symbol that Tyler has turned him into.

In the end, as all the bombs Tyler has planted fail to explode, Joe puts a gun in his mouth and pulls the trigger (*FC* 205), an act that permanently 'kills' Tyler but which Joe survives, (*FC* 207), leaving him in complete control of his own mind. Tyler had asserted that self-destruction

is the only true way of knowing yourself, and through ‘committing suicide’, arguably the most severe form of self-destruction possible, Joe has finally rid himself of Tyler, which essentially validates Tyler’s philosophy. Although the real reason that Joe survives is that the bullet merely tears open his cheek, I would argue that it also makes perfect thematic sense; Joe was not really killing himself, but killing Tyler.

To choose life is to choose violence – an active, creative destruction which is explicitly contrasted with the comfortable and apathetic passivity of extinction: ‘I really wanted to put a bullet between the eyes of every endangered panda that wouldn’t screw to save its species and every whale or dolphin that gave up and ran itself aground’ (*FC* 124). As such, Joe’s ‘suicide’ is the ultimate expression of his ‘will to live’ (*FC* 202).

3.2 *Survivor* (1999)

Suicide primarily appears in *Fight Club* as a theoretical possibility that is never realised: Marla is stopped in her suicide attempt (*FC* 59), Joe survives both the deliberate car crash and the savage beatings from fight club members (*FC* 146, 202), and Tyler fails to turn Joe into a martyr (*FC* 205). The only ‘successful’ suicide is a symbolic one, with Joe ostensibly failing to kill himself but succeeding in ‘killing’ Tyler.

By contrast, virtually every aspect of the plot of *Survivor* revolves around suicide to some extent. The Creedish church, a doomsday cult, committed mass suicide when their colony came under scrutiny from the authorities. Ten years later, Creedish church member Tender Branson has still failed in what he was raised to do without question or hesitation; he has failed to follow his fellow cult members in suicide. By the standards of his own religion, he is a heretic simply by being alive. However, the novel’s opening and framing device ostensibly finds him in the middle of a protracted suicide attempt: He has hijacked an airplane, having everyone else disembark, and is now intending to keep the plane flying on autopilot until it inevitably runs out of fuel and crashes (*Survivor* 284). As he recounts the events of his life to the plane’s black box, the page numbers of the novel, which start at 289, are continually counting down to his seemingly inevitable demise.

Like all Creedish church members who are sent out into the world when they reach adulthood, Tender has been employed performing all manner of menial tasks for rich people. Living a very solitary and monotonous life, he spends his nights convincing others to kill themselves over the phone, seemingly for his own amusement. He remarks that this makes him a '[p]art-time god' (S 281). He defends his actions by claiming that the world is a terrible place, and that he is simply ending their suffering (S 280). Sondergard describes Tender as being 'doubly haunted', both by his rejection of the role prescribed for him by the cult and for the role he continues to play in the suicides of strangers (Sondergard 14). Whether or not he is truly 'haunted' by the latter is debateable, but his true motivations are hard to glean; is he guiding total strangers to their deaths for them to succeed where he has failed, to be 'delivered'? Is he atoning for his failure by providing other human sacrifices as appeasement? Or is he rejecting the cult's teachings absolutely, making a mockery of his failure to kill himself by personally presiding over numerous other suicides, while stubbornly remaining among the living? These questions are never given clear answers; it is quite possible that, if pressed, Tender would not know how to answer them.

Tender's failure to kill himself could be attributed to a lack of belief in an afterlife. He frequently visits a local mausoleum, hoping for his doubts to be disproven:

my dream is that some night around the next corner will be an open crypt in the wall and near it will be a desiccated cadaver, the skin wilted on its face [...] I want to be chased by flesh-eating zombies. [...] I just want some proof that death isn't the end. Even if crazed zombies [...] tore me apart, at least that wouldn't be the absolute end. There would be some comfort in that. It would prove some kind of life after death, and I could die happy. (S 256-255)

Despite Tender's assertions that he does intend to commit suicide (S 133), he never offers any real insight as to why he would actually want to do so, or about how he feels about the prospect of suicide in general. This is also the only instance in the novel where he reflects on the possibility of an afterlife. As such, his hope for an intervention from the undead is arguably one of the most revealing aspects about his character.

When, ten years after the mass suicide, Tender is finally the sole survivor of the Creedish church, he becomes world famous. With a newly acquired agent gleefully guiding his way, he

begins the process of completely reinventing himself, in order to capitalise on his newfound fame. Beginning a brutal exercise regimen, he describes the relentless pain as he climbs hundreds of flights of stairs on a StairMaster:

The lining of my lungs feels the way a ladder looks in nylon stockings, stretched, snagged, a tear. [...] The way a tire looks before a blowout, that's how my lungs feel. The way it smells when your electric heater or hair dryer burns off a layer of dust, that's how hot my ears feel. [...] Those clear plastic bags you get a single serving of honey-roasted peanuts in on a plane instead of a real meal, that's how small my lungs feel. (*S* 154-152)

Here, the boundaries between self-harm and self-improvement are decidedly blurred, introducing a new dimension to Palahniuk's thematic uses of bodily destruction. As he fully commits to his new way of life, Tender agrees to every suggestion: 'You're going to lose it anyway. Your body. You're already losing it. It's time you bet everything. This is why when the agent comes to you with anabolic steroids, you say yes. [...] According to the agent, the secret to getting famous is you just keep saying yes' (*S* 149). However, as with suicide, Tender gives little to no indication that fame is something that he truly *wants*. Tender has spent his entire life doing what he is told without question, and his newfound circumstances don't have a very significant impact on this mentality; he has simply found a new group of people to dictate his actions for him.

At the same time, he still has plans to kill himself, or so he tells himself. He is now claiming that he has simply needed a proper audience before going through with his suicide (*S* 133). This is rather doubtful, however; the attention itself has now become his main motivation. His body is the opposite of a temple, good for nothing but transportation (*S* 150). He is taking countless medications and constantly dealing with their myriad side effects:

my spleen and gallbladder are enormous from the effects of human growth hormone. [...] Your thyroid shuts down natural production of thyroxine. [...] After I cycled some Russian-made Metahapoctehosich for seventeen weeks all my hair fell out, and the agent bought me a wig. [...] 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. (*S* 136-134)

Still, he tells himself that he can live with all these side effects because he does not intend to keep living for much longer (*S* 134). Suicide has become the ultimate backup plan, the ultimate solution, but he may not actually have it in him to kill himself, despite his assertions to the contrary. Moreover, even if he did, would he then be following his church's doctrine, or would this simply be one final desperate plea for attention? Tender's ultimate feelings about the Creedish church's teachings remain obscure. He was raised to serve, to obey, and so he makes very few concrete decisions for himself, instead allowing others to dictate the direction of his life and letting things simply *happen* around him. Even the side effects of fame are supposedly a way to not have to choose, a way of 'dying without the control issues' (*S* 130).

Tender comes to realise that he is actually not the last surviving member of the Creedish church; Adam, his identical twin brother, is revealed to have spent the last decade sporadically murdering surviving church members and staging the murders as suicides, which in turn would spur more members to commit suicide (*S* 224). In a parallel to Tender, Adam also appears to be simultaneously rejecting and embracing the cult's teachings. It was Adam who reported the Creedish church to the authorities, which precipitated their mass suicide (*S* 34). While Adam may simply feel that the Creedish church needs to be well and truly eradicated, and that he is punishing its members for their complicity in immoral acts, he is arguably also helping the church in fulfilling the ultimate purpose of its members, as he makes a reference to 'Delivering people to God' (*S* 64). His intentions appear conflicted: perhaps he is killing the surviving members to ensure that the church's teachings are ultimately followed, thus atoning for his role in the mass suicide of the Creedish church members. When a car crash leaves him blinded in one eye and in terrible agony, he declares it to be his 'punishment' (*S* 32). Adam may not have killed himself as he was taught to do, but in the end, he manipulates Tender into doing it for him; under the pretence of avoiding being raped in prison, he asks Tender to 'destroy how I look', promising that 'I'll tell you when I've had enough', then allows Tender to unwittingly beat him to death (*S* 31-29). Evidently, this was always what Adam ultimately wanted: regardless of whether it is due to a sense of religious duty or out of feelings of guilt, he has ensured that the entire Creedish church (with the exception of Tender) has been 'delivered to God', and so, he is free to die.

However, Adam wants something different for his brother, Tender. He wants Tender to reject the church's teachings absolutely, by breaking the ultimate taboo of sexual intercourse (*S* 38-37). The way this taboo was impressed upon the children of the Creedish church was the very

reason that Adam reported them to the authorities; any children in the church colony who were not permitted to stay or to have children of their own once they reached adulthood were made to watch every time a pregnant woman in the church district gave birth, making them forever terrified of sex (*S* 34). While the Creedish way of life delineated two very different roles for Adam and Tender, casting Adam as the older brother, the one meant to remain in the colony and carry on the family line, the truth is that they are identical twins (*S* 272). No matter how distorted by time and twisted by the many radical steps that he has taken to achieve global fame, Tender is still Adam's mirror image. He is what Adam would have been, had he been born a few minutes later; their roles could very easily have been reversed, and it could have been Adam who was raised to fear sex and to live for nothing but servitude. Echoing Joe's relationship to Tyler, Adam represents everything that Tender is not but that he might have been. Adam may consider himself a lost cause, deeming himself to be in need of atonement and punishment, but it is clear that this is not what he wants for Tender. He wants Tender to make his own way in the world, to reject the church and to live on, in whichever way he chooses.

Sondergard identifies 'guilt associated with others' destruction' as an instigating force for the plot in Palahniuk's novels (Sondergard 11). Indeed, Tender is keeping a secret from Fertility³ Hollis, his ostensible love interest: the fact that he convinced her brother Trevor to commit suicide, a guilt which arguably sets the plot of the novel in motion (*S* 280, 213). Trevor killed himself because he could see the future and couldn't 'live with knowing the future and not being able to save anyone' (*S* 281). This same fate befell their mother; as Fertility puts it, suicide is 'an old family tradition for us' (*S* 213). When Fertility also begins to see the future in her dreams, her main concern is not powerlessness, but boredom; 'Do you have any idea how boring it is to be me? To know everything? To see everything coming from a million miles away? It's getting unbearable' (*S* 111). Desperate to break out of her deterministic monotony, she sees in Tender a chance to escape the tedium of knowing everything; 'Because you grew up in another world [...] Because if anybody is going to surprise me, it's going to be you. [...] You're my only hope of seeing anything new. You're the magic prince that can break this spell of boredom' (*S* 110). When Tender finally does break the last taboo of the Creedish church by sleeping with Fertility, who, despite her assumed name, is supposedly sterile, she is shocked to realise that she is pregnant; despite knowing everything that will happen, she had not seen herself becoming pregnant. As she is sure that any child of hers would also be cursed to know

³ "Fertility" is later revealed to be an assumed name; her real name is Gwen.

the future, she is far from thrilled by this turn of events (S 13). Still, she was correct: if anyone was going to surprise her, it was going to be Tender.

Sondergard asserts that Palahniuk's characters tend to merely 'retain the illusion of autonomy and control in situations where their pending doom seems probable, or even unavoidable, to the reader' (Sondergard 12). In *Survivor*, Fertility both subverts and reinforces this idea: Because she sees the future, Tender surrenders what little autonomy he has to Fertility, and she guides Tender's actions every step of the way. But even as he is aware of this fact, their situation spirals out of control, and when he is forced to think on his feet and hijack an airplane, he believes that he is exercising his free will. Of course, he is still futilely following what Fertility has already seen play out in her visions (S 7-6). When he is finally alone in a plane that is slowly descending towards an unavoidable crash, Tender remains passive; even when he is effectively committing suicide, he is simply allowing things to happen, and wondering if he can find a way out of the situation. Because Fertility assured him that he would know what to do to save himself, Tender has surrendered his free will and sits helpless as the plane hurtles towards the ground (S 2-1); though he may not be able to save himself, he will at least be 'dying without the control issues' (S 130). In this way, *Survivor* constitutes the mirror image of *Fight Club*: just as Tender has spent his life not *living*, but merely *surviving*, his suicide is not an act of active self-destruction, but a passive resignation to what he perceives as its inevitability.

3.3 *Invisible Monsters* (1999)

Invisible Monsters is the story of Shannon, a former model who has hideously disfigured her own face, and her friendship with the glamorous and flamboyant transwoman Brandy Alexander. The concept of the self, of identity, and of concealing one's identity from others, is a central motif in *Invisible Monsters*, which occasionally leads to the plot being rather convoluted and difficult to summarise. Self-mutilation is once again presented as a way to transcend, to achieve some sort of higher state. The novel's two main characters both use self-mutilation as a means of radically altering, if not completely eradicating, the self, ostensibly to attain some vague state of authenticity. According to Jacobsen, they both use their bodies 'to attack and deconstruct traditional concepts of sexual identity through self-mutilation, pain and suffering' (Jacobsen 94). According to Sondergard, they are 'redesigning their being-in-the-world through techniques of brutality performed upon and against their own bodies'

(Sondergard 24). Ng notes how the novel suggests that both conformity and non-conformity to the bodily ideals of modern society constitute different forms of self-mutilation: 'Self-mutilation, a recurring motif in *Invisible Monsters*, presents the body with the possibility of subverting culture's domination in order to reassert itself as identity' (Ng 25-26).

By inflicting pain and destruction on one's own body, it is reclaimed: 'Only through pain, suffering and bodily disfigurement, Palahniuk seems to suggest, can "identity" become personalized as authentic experience (as in, this pain, and therefore this body, *are undeniably mine*)' (Ng 26). To inflict violence on one's own body, to the point where one can no longer fit societal ideals is, in fact, a way to inflict violence on these monstrous labels and norms: 'precisely through self-mutilation can a real life emerge from the artifice of labels that much of the discourse of *Invisible Monsters* undermines. Instead of the monstrosity of bodies, the monstrosity of the categories for understanding those bodies has weighed on these characters' (Slade 71). The notion of identity as corporeal, rooted in the body, was also proclaimed by Nietzsche, who asserted that the body is a stronger and more durable element than the spirit: '[...] the most external aspect, that which can be seen, has, as usage, deportment, ceremony, the most *durability*: it is the *body* to which a *new soul* is always being added' (Nietzsche 1996: 329). If this is true, then the characters' radical self-mutilations might truly allow them to 'transcend' their original identities; to bring about a new identity, a new self, as they are hoping they will. According to Slade, both Shannon and Brandy are 'chasing a form of existence that only emerges beyond the limit imposed by the mutilation of the body' (Slade 71). 'In Palahniuk's postmodern sublime', Slade argues, 'the practice of mutilation is the sublime figuration of survival. Mutilation is how the sublime itself survives American culture' (Slade 71). Williams notes that they 'seem only capable of saving themselves by first destroying themselves and others' (Williams 171).

Despite her desire to cast off the demands of modern capitalist society and media, Shannon still craves attention for her physical appearance: 'sometimes being mutilated can work to your advantage. All those people now with piercings and tattoos and brandings and scarification . . . What I mean is, attention is attention' (*Invisible Monsters* 53). This desire (any attention being good attention) is rooted in her jealousy of her older brother, whose face had been mutilated in a 'hairspray accident'. As a result, Shannon claimed, her parents had neglected her: 'They just liked my brother more because he was mutilated' (*IM* 72). Her jealousy takes delusional proportions: 'He didn't have to work for it. It was so easy. Just by being all burned and slashed

up with scars, he hogged all the attention' (*IM* 73). In an absurd comment on the 'marketability' of physical deformity, Shannon concludes that, 'Yeah, he was pretty mutilated, but not in a sexy way. Still, there's a happy ending [...] He's dead now' (*IM* 72).

In her desperate desire to be loved, Shannon is willing to completely obliterate her identity: 'Oh, love me, love me, love me, love me, love me, love me, love me, love me. I'll be anybody you want me to be' (*IM* 105). Despite her efforts to make her parents love her, to make *anyone* love her, or even notice her (*IM* 73, 105), she finally realises that she may have an even bigger problem; her own inability to love another person. 'I'm an invisible monster, and I'm incapable of loving anybody. You don't know which is worse' (*IM* 198).

Much like Tender Branson with his fame, Shannon has been stuck in a kind of loop regarding her own beauty: She both craves and loathes the attention it gives her. As a model, her appearance has been the focal point of her life and her identity; as noted by Ng, 'she struggles constantly to maintain impossible standards of attractiveness' (Ng 25), even directly referring to it as a form of 'self-mutilation' (*IM* 70). Shannon has been 'addicted to being beautiful, and that's not something you just walk away from. Being addicted to all that attention, I had to quit cold turkey' (*IM* 285). Finally, some part of her decides to reject this life completely and absolutely: in what Williams refers to as 'an extreme form of asceticism' (Williams 176), Shannon shoots herself in the face,⁴ losing almost her entire jaw (*IM* 282). She has previously considered and ultimately rejected a number of alternative solutions, but finally decides on this because, 'I had to deal with my looks in a fast, permanent way or I'd always be tempted to go back' (*IM* 285-286). Here, Shannon approaches her own beauty in much the same way that Tyler approaches society: as something that needs to be irrevocably destroyed, so as to make it impossible to return to the way things were.

Shannon's descriptions of her mutilated face are in themselves so sensationalised and graphic as to appear attention-seeking:

The way my face is without a jaw, my throat just ends in sort of a hole with my tongue hanging out. Around the hole, the skin is all scar tissue: dark red lumps and shiny the way you'd look if you got the cherry pie in a pie eating contest. If I let my tongue hang down,

⁴ The fact that her mutilation is self-inflicted is not revealed until the climax of the novel.

you can see the roof of my mouth, pink arid smooth as the inside of a crab's back, and hanging down around the roof is the white vertebrae horseshoe of the upper teeth I have left. (IM 136)

At other times, her face is portrayed as so depersonalised as to no longer appear human: 'My face, you touch my blasted, scar-tissue face and you'd swear you were touching chunks of orange peel and leather' (IM 197). 'If I can't be beautiful, I want to be invisible', she says (IM 214), while paradoxically wanting the ultimate attention that she feels this self-mutilation can give her (IM 286). It is worth pointing out, however, that the only person who has decided that Shannon can no longer be beautiful is Shannon herself; therefore, her perceived limitation ('If I can't be beautiful') is very much self-imposed.

At the beginning of the novel, Shannon desperately seeks to use the story of how her face was mutilated to gain attention: '[A]ll I wanted was for somebody to ask me what happened to my face. "Birds ate it," I wanted to tell them. Birds ate my face. But nobody wanted to know' (IM 32). Only when she meets Brandy does she find her desired audience, telling Brandy: 'Birds. I write: birds, birds ate my face. And I start to laugh. [...] someone shot a 30-caliber bullet from a rifle. the bullet tore my entire jawbone off my face. [...] they couldn't put my jaw back because seagulls had eaten it' (IM 59). However, Brandy points out that Shannon merely uses her story as a crutch, stuck in a continuous repetition of her past: 'When you understand [...] that what you're telling is just a story. It isn't happening anymore. When you realize the story you're telling is just words, when you can just crumble it up and throw your past in the trashcan [...] then we'll figure out who you're going to be' (IM 61). It is not only Shannon's beauty, but also the *story* of her disfigurement, that must be destroyed if she is to move on from the pressures and limitations she feels that her beauty has placed upon her.

Having taken such a drastic course of action, she details at great length the gruesome, harrowing details of what she would have to go through if she were to attempt surgical reconstruction of her face (IM 203-213). 'To relocate a piece of skin, to rebuild a jaw, you have to flay a long strip of skin from your neck. [...] Leave it rolled until it heals into a long, dangling lump of flesh, hanging from the bottom of your face. [...] Just the healing part, that can take months' (IM 203). The graphic descriptions of the surgeries and healing process emphasise that the road to beauty is paved with gruesome mutilation and destruction: 'What you're paying for most is the mess' (IM 203). Reminiscent of a modern Frankenstein's monster, the patient is

deconstructed into its most fleshy repulsive parts, ‘some meat byproduct ground up and pooped out’, and then reassembled into a corporeal patchwork: ‘A mummy coming apart in the rain. A broken piñata’ (*IM* 207). Even after what would ultimately be years of horrific surgeries, there are still no guarantees that they would be successful: ‘This is years of pain later. Years of living in the hope that what you’ll get will be better than what you have. Years of looking and feeling worse in the hope that you might look better’ (*IM* 213).

She declines the offer of extensive reconstructive surgery, fearing that she would be drawn back to a life centred around beauty: ‘I ran because just getting my jaw rebuilt was too much temptation to revert, to play that game, the looking good game’ (*IM* 288). Yet despite her hopes that her self-destructive act would result in rebirth, she quickly returns to old patterns, simultaneously craving and loathing attention for her physical appearance; her beauty merely exchanged for monstrosity. Even her reasoning at the time of her shooting reveals that her act is merely a more extreme form of self-fashioning: ‘This makeover would make piercings and tattoos and brandings look so lame’ (*IM* 287).

However, she is still free to watch others as much as she wants. She is free to be invisible; her ugliness has set her free: ‘When nobody will look at you, you can stare a hole in them’ (*IM* 24). And yet, she immediately falls into Brandy’s orbit. She cannot avoid all temptations, but she gets to experience the glamour of Brandy’s life (which is somewhat reminiscent of her own past life) while remaining mostly invisible. She is still unsatisfied: ‘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’ (*IM* 224). She thinks that the solution lies in making the biggest mistake possible: ‘What I need to do is fuck up so bad I can’t save myself’ (*IM* 224). When she realises that Brandy is actually Shane, the brother she always resented and thought to be dead, she begins plotting Brandy’s murder; perhaps this will be the thing that she cannot save herself from (*IM* 181).

Brandy Alexander has gone through multiple painful surgeries in her gradual process to become a woman, missing only the actual sexual reassignment surgery. From her many surgeries, she is in constant pain and taking any pain medication she can get her hands on. However, she has no actual desire to become a woman: ‘I’m only doing this because it’s just the biggest mistake I can think to make’, she states (*IM* 258). Here, her motivations distort gender-affirming surgery into a very different procedure, namely the process of becoming Other: ‘A sexual reassignment

surgery is a miracle for some people, but if you don't want one, it's the ultimate form of self-mutilation' (*IM* 259). Before this, she has first considered amputating an arm and a leg or contracting AIDS. Her transition serves as 'the path to the greatest discovery' (*IM* 259), since it was 'the biggest mistake I could think to make [...] The biggest challenge I could give myself. [...] You have to jump into disaster with both feet' (*IM* 259-260). Echoing Tyler Durden's belief that one needs to hit rock bottom in order to transcend, Brandy stresses the creative function of self-harm and self-destructive tendencies: 'Our real discoveries come from chaos, [...] from going to the place that looks wrong and stupid and foolish' (*IM* 258). Drawing a parallel to 'Fleming and his bread mold', failures and mistakes may give rise to true progress and innovation. Slade similarly raises the possibility that 'the mutilation of the body is a way to create new possibilities for value, identity, in short, an authentic existence in a world which appears to have erased these possibilities' (Slade 62). Indeed, Brandy hopes that this act of self-mutilation will serve as a permanent rejection of the ideals and expectations of society and allow her to attain some kind of authenticity: 'I figure, the bigger the mistake looks, the better chance I'll have to break out and live a real life' (*IM* 258-259).

Brandy is so unhappy with her life and identity that she wishes to become someone else entirely, and so through surgery, clothing and cosmetics, she models herself after her estranged sister, Shannon. She is not just abandoning her identity for a new one; she is abandoning it and taking someone else's (*IM* 177). However, she is still holding off on her final surgery, which would be her final act of self-mutilation, the final and complete eradication of her identity. She hesitates because she is hoping that she can get Shannon to love her; if she can get the love and acceptance that her resentful sister has denied her for so long, and simply be loved for who she is, she could reach some kind of contentment that would make her final surgery unnecessary (*IM* 180-181).

Examples of the many steps Brandy has taken in her transition include laser surgery to thin her vocal cords; a trachea shave; contouring of the nose and jawline; forehead realignment and scalp advancement; brow bone shave and bone lift; liposuction; silicone implants; and prolonged hormone treatments (*IM* 177-180, 198). Her chosen gender is reduced to its basic component parts; into commodities which can be replaced whenever a newer model is released. Shannon flips through Brandy's glossy 'brochures from surgeons showing sexual reassignment surgeries', with photos showing different models of artificial vaginas, of varying quality; 'Bad, cheap vaginas', 'old-style vaginas', 'Picture perfect, state-of-the-art vaginas', 'The Cadillac of

vaginoplasty' (*IM* 222-223). Brandy has nearly succeeded in erasing every trace of her old self, to the point that her own sister does not recognise her: 'Like it's any wonder I didn't recognize my old mutilated brother' (*IM* 180).

Brandy's self-harm also serves a narrative function, allowing her to gain some control over her life story: '[....] in the end my whole body is my story' (*IM* 259). In a parallel to Joe's personified organs in *Fight Club*, Brandy introduces herself by gesturing to her most distinguishing features – her breasts, her hair, her lips – and proclaiming that 'this [...] is the Princess Brandy Alexander' (*IM* 25). Her features have become synecdoches, presented as the defining aspects, if not the sum total, of her identity. Brandy continuously portrays her transition as a manifestation of her own true autonomy. Yet, at the same time, she also displaces this agency, portraying her surgery as something that has been done to her, rather than something that she has chosen: "The doctors, they took out the bottom rib on each side of my chest." Her hands rub where, and she says, "I couldn't sit up in bed for two months, but I had a sixteen-inch waist. I still have a sixteen-inch waist." [...] "They cut out two of my ribs, and I never saw them again" [...] Brandy says, "I don't know why I let them do that to me" (*IM* 196). Here, her pain is not self-chosen: "My back is killing me," Brandy says. "Why'd I ever let them give me such big tits?" (*IM* 199).

Brandy's view of the artificiality of the self is, in a way, optimistic. To quote Williams: 'For Brandy, if the body and, thus, the self is plastic and artificial, then it can be reconstructed' (Williams 180). She uses the same logic to comfort Shannon: 'Brandy catches me with my hands up under my veil, touching the seashells and ivory of my exposed molars, stroking the embossed leather of my scar tissue [...] Brandy says not to watch myself too close. "Honey," she says, "times like this, it helps to think of yourself as a sofa or a newspaper, something made by a lot of other people but not made to last forever"' (*IM* 216). The impermanence, artificiality, and commonness of the individual body means that 'There isn't any real *you* in *you* [...] Even your physical body, all your cells will be replaced within eight years. [...] Skin, bones, blood, and organs transplant from person to person' (*IM* 218). All parts of you can be replaced, like Theseus' ship, because you were never really you to begin with. Moreover, the body you are born with is little more than a mishmash of family heirlooms: 'Nothing of you is all-the-way yours. All of you is inherited' (*IM* 218). Only through the characteristics you acquire, the damage and scars you inflict on your body, can it truly be said to belong to you. This is a good

example of Slade's observation that, 'In Palahniuk's writing, the human body is the site for the inscription 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 62). Yet this view of the body as artificial, fake, and ephemeral also threatens to undermine the very possibility of such an authentic experience. As Ng notes, experience is mediated 'through and by the *body*'; but if the body is revealed as 'a socio-ideological construction', then both these notions — of authentic experience and the natural body — are rendered false (Ng 25-26). Brandy's continuous negation of the self also undermines the very concept of self-harm. To mutilate her already artificial and fake body can barely be said to constitute self-harm, as there is so little of the authentic body left. When Brandy is shot, Shannon uses the same logic to portray the violence inflicted on her body: 'What I tell myself is the gush of red pumping out of Brandy's bullet hole is less like blood than it's some sociopolitical tool. The thing about being cloned from all those shampoo commercials, well, that goes for me and Brandy Alexander, too. Shotgunning anybody in this room would be the moral equivalent of killing a car, a vacuum cleaner, a Barbie doll. [...] Probably that goes for killing anybody in the world. We're all such products' (*IM* 12). Yet, the same impermanence of the body also threatens to undercut any lasting effects of this 'liberating' self-harm; the possibility of returning to conformity is always looming.

As Andrew Ng notes, 'Brandy, who used to be a man, transforms himself to look profoundly *like* a woman in order to escape the labels prescribed to "him" by society' (Ng 26). Yet at the same time, Brandy appears to be aware that by transitioning into a woman, she has simply traded the beauty ideals, societal expectations, and cultural norms of one gender for another: 'It's because we're so trapped in our culture, in the being of being human on this planet with the brains we have, and the same two arms and two legs everybody has. We're so trapped that any way we could imagine to escape would be just another part of the trap. Anything we want, we're trained to want' (*IM* 259). Shannon's extreme act of self-mutilation, on the other hand, represents a true break from societal norms, eschewing not only the beauty ideals of her gender, but becoming so Other as to approach the monstrous, something that is no longer human. Despite all the painful surgeries she has gone through, Brandy still envies Shannon and her supposed courage: "'When I met you," she says, "I envied you. I coveted your face. I thought that face of yours will take more guts than any sex change operation. It will give you bigger discoveries. It will make you stronger than I could ever be"' (*IM* 261). In her mind, Shannon's actions were more radical and courageous, because while Brandy may have wanted to be

someone else entirely, leading her to attempt to become her sister, Shannon wanted to be *nobody*.

In the end, Shannon and Brandy both confess to each other that their original mutilations were very much self-inflicted; Shannon shot herself in the face, and Brandy threw the hairspray onto the fire. Only by admitting to herself and to others that her mutilation was self-inflicted can Shannon finally reclaim her agency and transcend her old identity as an invisible monster. ‘Now my whole new future is still out there waiting for me. The truth is, being ugly isn’t the thrill you’d think, but it can be an opportunity for something better than I ever imagined’ (*IM* 288). She leaves, gifting Brandy her identity, accepting the reality of her mutilated face and resolving to find some kind of life for herself outside of beauty and attention (*IM* 293). As Williams notes, ‘Shannon serves as a particularly clear example of Palahniuk’s effort to illustrate the liberation that proceeds from recognizing the illusion of “selfhood”’ (Williams 174). She has finally achieved what she hoped to accomplish with her extreme act of self-mutilation: she has moved beyond her identity altogether.

4. Conclusion

One constant in the works of Chuck Palahniuk, and something that his first three novels clearly exemplify, is that his writing is at its most colourful and detailed when he is describing the myriad ways in which the human body can be destroyed. Often, this will take the form of a list, the damage gradually getting worse and the descriptions gradually more gruesome. Joe signing up for fifty consecutive fights in *Fight Club*; Tender pushing his body past its limits as he climbs hundreds of flights on his StairMaster in *Survivor*; the long and arduous process of facial reconstructive surgery in *Invisible Monsters*; these are the details that Palahniuk chooses to linger on above all else. Reading these relentlessly gruesome descriptions of the human body as they sometimes go on for several pages can be an occasionally overwhelming experience for the reader, which is undoubtedly Palahniuk’s intention. At other times, the sheer excessive details can sometimes get so drawn out and so extreme and absurd that the effect ends up being darkly comedic, such as in this passage from *Fight Club*: ‘My boss, at work, he asked me what I was doing about the hole through my cheek that never heals. When I drink coffee, I told him,

I put two fingers over the hole so it won't leak' (*FC* 123). Either way, there is little doubt that Palahniuk's imagery can elicit strong reactions from the reader.

I would argue that the motif of self-mutilation in Palahniuk's novels makes two seemingly diametrically opposed points. On the one hand, it underlines the fragility and impermanence of the human body; how easily a man's face can be permanently ruined; how quickly various bodily functions will stop working when subjected to steroids and an excess of prescription drugs; or just how difficult it can be to surgically rebuild something that it only took an instant to destroy so completely. On the other hand, it arguably also serves as a reminder of the ultimate resilience of the human body; it can, after all, withstand massive amounts of abuse and still endure. Joe is beaten to within an inch of his life, but he remains defiant of Tyler; once the drugs are out of his system, Tender's body slowly starts returning to normal; Shannon manages to go on living without the lower half of her face; and Brandy has had close to every single part of her body lasered, shaved, enhanced, readjusted, removed or otherwise altered by hormone therapy, which also displays just how mutable the human body is, and how far it can be pushed from its original state, while still being able to function.

Another recurring motif in Palahniuk's work is depersonalisation; our individuality does not matter, and we are little more than a product, something mass-produced and artificial. Tyler Durden's message to the recruits of Project Mayhem leaves no room for interpretation: 'You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everyone else, and we are all part of the same compost pile' (*FC* 134). Similarly, Brandy Alexander highlights the artificiality of both the human body and human individuality: 'The same way a compact disk isn't responsible for what's recorded on it, that's how we are. You're about as free to act as a programmed computer. You're about as one-of-a-kind as a dollar bill' (*IM* 218). Tender Branson was in fact only the first of eight brothers to be called 'Tender'; in the Creedish church, only the firstborn son was allowed a name (and then only one possible name: Adam), and all daughters were called Biddy. The Creedish church did not even allow for the individuality of proper names: 'Tenders are workers who tend. Biddies do your bidding' (*S* 240). All firstborn sons remained in the church colony, along with whichever daughters were chosen to marry a firstborn son. Once they reached adulthood, all other children were sent out into the world to labour for the rest of their lives, sending most of their meagre salaries back to the church colony (*S* 242-240).

This ties into what I would consider to be the most significant function that the motifs of bodily destruction and self-mutilation have in Palahniuk's work, namely as a means of exploring the dichotomy between determinism and free will, or between agency and a lack thereof. In *Fight Club*, Joe starts out attending support groups, gatherings for people whose own bodies have turned against them. From there, he moves on to fight club, a place where men fight not for survival, but for pleasure, for a sense of thrill and catharsis. If their teeth are knocked out or if they require stitches, it is because they knowingly and willingly chose to seek out that situation. The participants of fight club are all claiming an agency over their own lives and bodies that they may not experience in their everyday lives. Tyler, meanwhile, is Joe's lack of control made manifest. He burns Joe's hand against his will, and Joe is unable to take refuge even in his own head, because Tyler is already in his head. Joe has lost agency over his own mind. When he wishes to defy Tyler and reassert his agency, he does so by signing up for far more fights than any one person could reasonably withstand, willingly submitting to being beaten until he resembles "a bloody tissue sample dried on a mattress" (FC 202).

Tender has lacked agency his entire life. While he has so far resisted committing suicide, he is still working the same menial jobs that the church assigned him, and he is still terrified of sex, as the church conditioned him to be. Becoming the supposed last survivor of the Creedish church is as much a result of his own inaction as anything else. As he becomes famous, he is immediately surrounded by people who want to govern not just his life, but his body, to which he readily agrees. The fact that Fertility knows the future makes a further mockery of the very idea of Tender's free will; Tender does whatever Fertility tells him to, because she says that this is what is going to happen. Even his eventual suicide by plane crash only comes about because she tells him that this is what he is going to do.

Suicide is a slightly more difficult subject to discuss. It is possible to argue for two very different interpretations; either it is the definitive display of agency and free will, an assertion that no one has more control over your life and your body than you, or it is the act of finally surrendering to your own lack of agency and free will, be it due to mental illness, grief or other factors. An especially interesting case is that of Fertility's brother, Trevor Hollis, because he had visions of the future. If Fertility is any indication, Trevor likely knew everything that was going to happen ahead of time, including that he would be committing suicide. If Trevor knew that his plea to Tender for 'one good reason not to pull the trigger' would end with him killing himself, and yet still made the call to Tender, he was ostensibly submitting to the whims of

determinism (*S*, 281), which in turn begs the question: was he actually suicidal, or did he commit suicide only because he had seen it in his own future?

Shannon's act of self-mutilation is an attempt to claim the agency which she feels she lacks in her life. Though it is tempting to try to get some semblance of her old life back, she stands her ground by refusing and running from the possibility of reconstructive surgery; it was her choice to lose her face, and she is standing by this choice. Brandy, meanwhile, is doing something she really does not want to do, precisely *because* she does not want to do it. The ultimate goal of Brandy's voluntary self-mutilation is to break out of the inherent limitations that she feels society has put upon her, to 'break out and live a real life' (*IM* 258). Her body is her story (*IM* 259); her identity is whatever she wants it to be. Likewise, Shannon's self-mutilation (eventually) allows her to leave her identity behind. As she has no identity left, she is free to be whoever she wants to be. By erasing both her former appearance and her identity, Shannon's fate is no longer predetermined by her beauty or by her monstrosity. She has shed the comforts of determinism and now faces the terrifying uncertainties of free will.

In an interview with *Believer Magazine*, Kathryn Borel asks Chuck Palahniuk how he keeps the violent themes of his books from 'destroying' him. His answer is a succinct summation of the philosophies espoused in his first three novels: 'It's not a bad thing that I'm destroyed. I'm a human being and I'm engaged. I'm alive and I'm not supposed to live forever' (Borel 2021).

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