

Teaching Postmodern Parody through Stephen King, Chuck Palahniuk, and *Fight Club*
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Abstract: Through postmodern parody, Chuck Palahniuk revitalizes Stephen King's ideas in "Why We Crave Horror Movies" in order to transform the horror genre into the transgressive genre for a contemporary audience. Palahniuk's rejuvenation of King's theory is illustrated through several of Palahniuk's stories. Palahniuk applies his transgressive theory through the parodic progression of *Fight Club*, *Fight Club II*, and "Fight Club for Kids."

In "Blood on the Bookstore Floor: Chuck Palahniuk and the Case of the Fainting Reader," Steffen Hantke explains the phenomenon of listeners collapsing during Palahniuk public readings through a comparison between Palahniuk and American horror-fiction guru Stephen King. After acknowledging Palahniuk's admiration for King's writing, Hantke quotes King's statements in *Danse Macabre*, his horror genre manifesto, to describe Palahniuk's work: ". . . let me briefly cite a passage . . . that seems strikingly apt as a description of Palahniuk's aesthetic: 'So, terror on top, horror below it, and lowest of all, the gag reflex of revulsion. . . . I recognize terror as the finest emotion . . . and so I will try to terrorize the reader. But if I find I cannot terrify him/her, I will try to horrify; and if I find I cannot horrify, I'll go for the gross-out. I'm not proud'" (206). Hantke claims this "gross-out" effect perhaps undermines horror fiction as serious American literature: "This is, in the public perception, what makes horror a subliterate genre—that it has intentions on its audience's bodies more than on its minds; that, . . . in dramatic opposition to satire, its emphasis on bodily affect is achieved at the price of intellectual engagement—or so the story goes. Needless to say, this subliterate reputation of horror must appeal to a writer like Palahniuk, who is trying to validate his own work in terms of subcultural capital" (206).

Hantke makes a valid point about the intellectual value of fiction that "grosses out" readers for the sake of spontaneous emotional response. Many academics agree that Palahniuk's scholastic currency is devalued by what they believe are obviously sensational tactics to move products within the economy of contemporary publishing. These academics see this as negative, as selling out artistically to make a profit commercially. As a representative of this faction, Lucy Ellmann writes, "What in the hell is going on? The

country that produced Melville, Twain, and James now venerates King, Crichton, Grisham, Sebold and Palahniuk. Their subjects? Porn, crime, pop culture and an endless parade of out-of-body experiences. Their methods? Cliché, caricature, and proto-Christian morality. Props? Corn chips, corpses, crucifixes. The agenda? Deceit: a dishonest throwing of the reader to the wolves. And the result? Readymade Hollywood scripts." Critics such as Ellmann fail to realize Palahniuk is revitalizing literature by reconfiguring the horror genre into contemporary transgressive fiction, giving the current generation of readers, thoroughly desensitized to what was "gross" in King's late twentieth century, an innovative repackaging of this provocative subject matter in the new millennium. Consequently, the academic enterprise of literary pedagogy must include the work of Palahniuk and other transgressive authors. Contrary to what scholars like Ellmann believe, transgressive fiction—even Palahniuk's grossest—should be on syllabi and taught in classes.

This said, as I have become older, I continue to relinquish my authority as a defender of the traditional American literary canon. There are certain writers whom I still believe absolutely must be taught no matter how loudly students (and colleagues) claim they should no longer be included in American literature survey classes, but I have given in (or been beaten down) to include texts that I would never have considered twenty years ago. Granted, I am not ready to include "bizarro" fiction—such as Charles Mellick III's *The Haunted Vagina* or *I Knocked Up Satan's Daughter*—on my American Literature II schedule, but I have assigned several of Palahniuk's works in various courses, and I have done so mostly within the context of postmodern parody. I have learned that comparing Palahniuk to King, more so examining how Palahniuk imitates King by refashioning his ideas for a new audience, gives me a strategy to have the best of both worlds, maintaining an academic approach while focusing on currently popular fiction. I have also found that comparing Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, perhaps the most canonical of all of his works and definitely his most well-known text, to *Fight Club II* and "Fight Club for Kids" allows me to discuss how parody functions as an aesthetic form. As the traditional American literary canon continues to evolve, transgressive literature will surely be included, and whereas King was a maverick in the horror genre a quarter of a century ago, Palahniuk has assumed high status as a major writer of transgressive fiction in 2017.

I always look forward to teaching Palahniuk. This entire process demands approximately three weeks within a semester. I require students to purchase *Fight Club* and *Fight Club II* as well as *Make Something Up: Stories You Cannot Unread*, which includes many of the Palahniuk stories that I address. I refer to Palahniuk's stories to demonstrate King/Palahniuk theoretical connections, and I use *Fight Club* and *Fight Club II* to illustrate postmodern parody. I rely on public domain via the Internet for additional sources. When I teach sophomore-level literature courses devoted to American literature, contemporary fiction, or popular genres, there are certainly opportunities to discuss postmodern parody, but there are not many occasions to go into depth. When I teach upper-level courses such as Studies in the American Novel or American Transgressive Fiction, I have the necessary meetings to sequence discussions of King's and Palahniuk's theories and analysis of Palahniuk's texts. Typically, students equate parody with humor, making fun of something, so I begin by clarifying that postmodern parody is not necessarily comedy. I concede that many of the Seth McFarlane programs that traditional students like to watch—*Family Guy*, *American Dad*, and *The Cleveland Show*—are comedies, but I note that they are also tinged with irony and sarcasm and are infused with darker shades of cultural criticism. One approach that enables me to teach postmodern parody effectively is to apply the concept first to King's "Why We Crave Horror Movies," a staple in most composition readers and readily available online, to Palahniuk's "The Power of Persisting," the introduction to Richard Thomas and Dennis Widmyer's *Burnt Tongues: An Anthology of Transgressive Stories*. I show students how Palahniuk echoes many of King's ideas, continuing King's legacy through a different genre, and then I apply this to versions of *Fight Club*, specifically sequencing the texts *Fight Club*, *Fight Club II*, and "Fight Club for Kids." Through analyzing Palahniuk's imitation of King's theory and then studying what is essentially Palahniuk's self-parody, I require students to think about how the content is similar yet different, and, more important, I force them to consider how the differences in fact call attention to and even accentuate the similarities.

I begin by defining postmodern parody and making the connection between King and Palahniuk. In *Chuck Palahniuk, Parodist: Postmodern Irony in Six Transgressive Novels*, I apply theory concerning what is "postmodern" parody to several of Palahniuk's novels. In the first chapter, I explain how the critical meaning of "parody" has been updated through

comparisons with other strategies: "remake," "adaptation," "allusion," "replica," "imitation," "satire," as well as "mash-up," "pastiche," "montage," and similar ideas (5). I also point out how the definition of parody has progressed in *A Handbook to Literature*, the undergraduate English-major bible. I mention how the fourth edition published in 1980 defines parody as "A composition burlesquing or imitating another, usually serious, piece of work. It is designed to ridicule in nonsensical fashion, or to criticize by brilliant treatment, an original piece of work by another author" (Holman 319). I then indicate that the twelfth edition published in 2012 offers something slightly different by omitting the qualities of burlesque and nonsense: "A composition imitating another—usually serious—piece. It is designed to ridicule a work or its style or author" (Harmon 353). To explain how parody is now "postmodern," I rely on Linda Hutcheon. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon contends that parody now demonstrates similarity while at the same time emphasizing difference. She writes, "What I mean by 'parody'. . . is *not* the ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions that are rooted in eighteenth-century theories of wit. The collective weight of parodic *practice* suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (26). I emphasize that postmodern parody is not always comic nor only duplicative but transforms its subject into something new, innovative, or ingenious. During an interview, responding to a question about how he began writing, Palahniuk states, "You know, my very first attempt when I was completely on my own without a teacher, without any kind of guidance, I thought I would try to write Stephen King fiction. So I sat down with every Stephen King book and I tried to copy everything that he did and it was just a waste of three or four years. I learned nothing and I accomplished nothing" ("Chuck"). Truth be told, Palahniuk's copying King turned into recasting King, developing those ideas into something similar yet distinctly different. Palahniuk calls his first true novel "a seven hundred page, fake Stephen King novel" (qtd. in Keese 12). By the end of this unit, students understand why Palahniuk never published that "fake" copy of King's work. They will see how Palahniuk's postmodern parodies of King are much more interesting.

Most students recognize the names King and Palahniuk, but they know little about their artistic theories. Few have any knowledge of King's innovations within the horror genre during the 1970s and 1980s; therefore, few have noticed how the horror genre has segued

into transgressive writing during the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, a shift spearheaded largely by Palahniuk. Besides defining "postmodern parody," I must explain what I mean by "transgressive." In "Chuck Palahniuk's *Beautiful You*, Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in The Human Female*, and the Commodification of Female Desire," I mention that transgressive writing "reacts against established ethical and moral societal standards; exposing the darker shades, bleaker terrains, and rougher contours of humanity than presented in most mainstream fiction; focusing on the nihilistic and existential vicissitudes associated within the human experience" (101). Characters are typically marginalized and strive for personal empowerment.

A comparison between King's "Why We Crave Horror Movies" and Palahniuk's "The Power of Persisting" and other writings clarifies these abstractions. King's essay is a subsection (173-75) from the chapter "The Modern American Horror Movie—Text and Subtext" (131-94) in *Danse Macabre*, and "Why We Crave Horror Movies" was published as an article in the January 1981 issue of *Playboy* magazine (150-54). King begins with the infamous declaration why viewers watch horror movies: "I think that we're all mentally ill; those of us outside the asylums only hide it a little better—maybe not all that much better, after all. . . ." (173). In "Foreword: The Fringe is the Future," Palahniuk echoes this statement by labeling the "mentally ill" the disenfranchised fringe: "People ask me why I write about characters who seem to live on the margins of society, and my answer is always that the fringe is the future.

Outside the mainstream, people are engaged in constant small experiments, testing new social models, new hierarchies, new personal identities. The most successful of those experiments—what begin as cults, fads, crazes, or manias—the ones that serve people best grow to become the next mainstream" (9). In class, an easy transition is to discuss how characters in King's films such as *Carrie*, *Pet Cemetery*, and *Christine* represent transgressive qualities and then to broach how Palahniuk accurately predicts these stories will eventually become the mainstream. I sometimes ask traditional students to apply elements of the transgressive to the cartoon series *Rick and Morty* (or other Adult Swim programs) to address how vulgarity, obscenity, and profanity—traits traditionally considered low culture—are now television mainstream. The transgressive now attracts college-age audiences—the fringe *is* the present—and King succinctly declares why.

In their essays, King and Palahniuk explain the impetus for this trend. I provide a PowerPoint presentation to go back and forth through the similarities in their commentaries. King writes, "When we pay our four or five bucks and seat ourselves at tenth-row center in a theater showing a horror movie, we are daring the nightmare. . . . To show that we can, that we are not afraid, that we can ride this roller coaster" (173). Audiences test boundaries, move out of comfort zones, and delve into unfamiliar life territory. In "The Power of Persisting," Palahniuk agrees: "We return to troubling films and books because they don't pander to us—their style and subject matter challenge, but to embrace them is to win something worth having for the rest of our lives" (3). King states that the horror movie "urges us to put away our more civilized and adult penchant for analysis and to become children again, seeing things in pure blacks and whites. It may be that horror movies provide psychic relief on this level because this invitation to lapse into simplicity, irrationality and even outright madness is extended so rarely. We are told we may allow our emotions a free rein . . . or no rein at all" (173-74). Palahniuk places this within the transgressive context, explaining how the mark of distinction resides in how well a text such as a horror film agitates, aggravates, and finally inspires the audience to question what is considered "civilized": "A hallmark of a classic long-lived story is how much it upsets the existing culture at its introduction. Take for example *Harold and Maude* and *Night of the Living Dead*—both got lambasted by reviewers and dismissed as distasteful, but they've survived to become as comforting as musty back issues of *Reader's Digest*" (3). This corresponds to King's point that cathartic madness eventually precipitates a recalculation of what constitutes ordinary: "We also go to re-establish our feelings of essential normality; the horror movie is innately conservative, even reactionary. Freda Jackson as the horrible melting woman in *Die, Monster, Die!* confirms for us that no matter how far we may be removed from the beauty of a Robert Redford or a Diana Ross, we are still light-years from true ugliness" (173). This is Palahniuk's argument precisely when he nails down the transformative potential of the transgressive: "Think of every movie you treasure. On closer inspection there are still parts of each story that you fast-forward through and parts you rewind to watch over. These parts change as your moods shift, but the extreme is what endures. What we resist persists" (4). As I go through these statements during class, I stress how Palahniuk contemporizes King's ideas for a new generation of readers, imitating while invigorating.

This is especially apparent in how Palahniuk responds to King's sections related to "sick jokes." King offers this analogy: "The mythic horror movie, like the sick joke, has a dirty job to do. It deliberately appeals to all that is worst in us. It is morbidity unchained, our most base instincts let free, our nastiest fantasies realized . . . and it all happens, fittingly enough, in the dark" (175). Prefacing the stories in *Burnt Tongues*, Palahniuk does not refer to the "worst" in readers but mentions how the transgressive calls attention to what repulses and "troubles" them: "The worst thing you could do is read this book and instantly enjoy every word. This book, the book you're holding, I hope you gag on a few words—more than a few. May some of the stories trouble you. Whether you like or dislike them doesn't matter; you've already touched these words with your eyes, and they're becoming part of you" ("Power" 4). To put theory into practice, both authors illustrate their declarations. King offers this example:

We have such "sick" jokes as, "What's the difference between a truckload of bowling balls and a truckload of dead babies?" (You can't unload a truckload of bowling balls with a pitchfork . . . a joke, by the way, that I heard originally from a ten-year-old.) Such a joke may surprise a laugh or a grin out of us even as we recoil, a possibility that confirms the thesis: If we share a Brotherhood of Man, then we also share an Insanity of Man. None of which is intended as a defense of either the sick joke or insanity but merely as an explanation of why the best horror films, like the best fairy tales, manage to be reactionary, anarchistic, and revolutionary all at the same time. (174-75)

Palahniuk elaborates on this in "Knock-Knock," and his reading of this story is available on *YouTube*. The narrator harbors anger toward his father, who loved to tell jokes, and most of the story reveals how deeply engrained his resentments are. The narrator comments, "What I do know is I've got a brain filled with jokes I can't ever forget—like a tumor the size of a grapefruit inside of my skull. And I know that eventually even dog shit turns white and stops stinking, but I have this permanent head filled with crap I've been trained my whole life to think is funny" (8). As his father dies in his hospital bed, expedited by the son's application of electric paddles (7), the speaker releases his pent-up outrage:

And for the first time I was a Little Stooze standing in that barbershop saying *fag* and *cunt* and *nigger* and saying *kike*, I figure out that I wasn't *telling* a joke—I *was* the joke. I mean, I finally *Get It*. Understand me: A bona fide gold-plated joke is like a Michelob served ice-cold . . . with a Mickey Finn . . . by somebody smiling *so nice* you won't never know how hard you've been fucked. And a punch line is called a "punch line" for a VERY good reason, because punch lines are a sugarcoated fist with whipped cream hiding the brass knuckles that socks you right in the kisser, hitting you—POW!—right in your face and saying, "*I am smarter than you*" and "*I'm bigger than you*" and "*I call the shots, here, Buddy-BOY.*" (8-9)

Unquestionably, readers "recoil" as they experience this passage, and instead of a nervous "laugh or grin," they feel more likely disgust at this son's treatment of a parent dying of cancer. This said, the joke to which the narrator refers is about a young woman who is repeatedly raped after drinking beers from the bartender laced with what is probably Rophenol, the date rape drug. In a politically correct society, there is nothing funny or humorous about inhumanity vis-a-vis prejudice and discrimination, yet this narrator's epiphanic response may evoke empathetic catharsis, no matter how perverse or immoral subject matter may be. King and Palahniuk recognize this unsavory truth about human nature.

And, this is exactly why they are both so popular. King confesses about horror films, "For myself, I like to see the most aggressive of them—*Dawn of the Dead*, for instance—as lifting a trap door in the civilized forebrain and throwing a basket of raw meat to the hungry alligators swimming around in that subterranean river beneath" (175). He concludes, "Why bother? Because it keeps them from getting out, man. It keeps them down there and me up here. It was Lennon and McCartney who said that all you need is love, and I would agree with that. As long as you keep the gators fed" (175). Palahniuk's most famous "aggressive" story is "Guts," which appeared in the March 2004 issue of *Playboy* as "Inhale" but was published as Saint Gut-Free's story in *Haunted*. The narrator describes how a botched masturbation attempt by sitting on an air-suction filter in his pool results in the extraction of his lower intestines. Perhaps the grossest—possibly the nonpareil example of King's "gross-

out"—details in this story portray the narrator biting through his own intestine to avoid drowning. As he comments, "That's all this soup of blood and corn, shit and sperm and peanuts, floating around me. Even with my guts unraveling out of my ass, me holding on to what's left, even then my first want is to somehow get my swimsuit back on" (19). Palahniuk's reading of this story is available through *YouTube*, and there is a legacy attached to this text achieving mythic status of listeners becoming physically ill (explored in Hantke's article).

In "The 'Guts' Effect," Palahniuk remembers the process underlying the story: "No one fainted the first time I read the short story This was on a Tuesday night, in the writer's workshop where my friends and I have shared our work since 1991. Each week, I would read another of the short stories I planned to include in a novel to be called *Haunted*. My goal was to create horror around very ordinary things: carrots, candles, swimming pools. Microwave popcorn. Bowling balls." He continues, "I told them how the three-act story of 'Guts' was based on three true anecdotes. Two had happened to friends, and the last had happened to a man I'd met while attending sex addict support groups to research my fourth novel. They were three funny, gradually more upsetting true stories about experiments with masturbation gone wrong. Horribly wrong. Nightmarishly wrong." Students will likely agree this story depicts an event going "horribly wrong" that nobody will designate as "normal," and they will also concur they are "light years away" from confessing even a mere passing thought of attempting something similar. "Nightmarishly wrong" may be an understatement.

A story that might be more "sick," associated with King's "base instincts" and "nastiest fantasies," is Palahniuk's "Cannibal." In this piece, an unattractive seventh-grader finds himself becoming the "secret boyfriend" (83) of a very popular and extremely sexy female, a senior named Marcia Sanders. Readers soon learn this young man is exploited for his prowess at cunnilingus. In a truly grotesque moment in the story, Marcia seduces this middle-school outcast into lying on her bed, on top of spread out towels, and allowing her to firmly plant her torso on his face. This kid's knowledge of sexuality is limited to what he has seen on *The Playboy Channel* (84-85). Similar to the operation of the pool filter, Cannibal's sucks Marcia to sexual orgasm. If this scenario were not "gross" enough, readers find out Marcia is pregnant and that Cannibal (as his name suggests) ingests more than vaginal fluid:

. . . Cannibal sucks the way a tornado on the Weather Channel will bust one window and turn your entire house inside out. . . . Because his only experience with lady sauce is from cable TV, Cannibal doesn't realize there's a chunk of something solid mixed in. Not right away. Because bumping between his tongue and the roof of his mouth, right now, is this salt-flavored jelly-bean. It's a kidney bean that tastes like the water in a jar of pickles. It's knocking around like the last green olive in a jar of boiling-hot olive water. (85-86)

If King's statement that the voyeuristic experience "keeps the gator fed," so to speak, one wonders what neurosis or dysfunction reading this passage about essentially a homemade abortion triggers. As "Cannibal" demonstrates—perhaps with too much gruesome clarity—Palahniuk has extended King's ideas about horror into the realm of the transgressive as readers are concurrently attracted and repulsed by the descriptions. The three versions of *Fight Club* are not as shocking as "Guts," "Cannibal," or "Knock-Knock," and I would not assign these stories outside of the context of this pedagogical exercise. These three stories are, however, vivid illustrations of how Palahniuk has taken King's ideas of the horrific to the transgressive level.

Fight Club could be seen as a horror novel as well as transgressive fiction. Palahniuk actually completed a sequence of three novels—*Lullaby* (2002), *Diary* (2003), and *Haunted* (2005)—tied to the horror theme, and although *Fight Club* has qualities of the horror genre and even science fiction, it is not distinctly one or the other. In *Understanding Chuck Palahniuk*, Douglas Keeseey devotes an entire chapter to "The Horror Trilogy" (50-67), and he writes, interspersed among Palahniuk's own comments,

In a post-9/11 environment less receptive to transgressive fiction—"People won't hear it sympathetically, they won't be able to laugh at it easily"—a more indirect approach to cultural criticism seemed advisable, and so Palahniuk turned to the horror genre as a "more effective avenue for social commentary." His main model was horror novelist Ira Levin [author of *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives*], whom he admired for being "so

very good at finding aspects of culture that were predominant during periods of time and creating metaphorical monsters around them." (50)

Keesey also mentions Palahniuk was asked immediately after 9/11 if *Fight Club* inspired the attacks (50). *Fight Club* is less a horror story than it is a psychological thriller with attributes of realism (related to the commonplace) and romance (related to the fantastic). Although Keesey highlights the influence of Levin, Palahniuk seems to rely on King more extensively. Granted, as Keesey points out, Palahniuk decided to take a hiatus from his subversively rebellious writing—hijacking planes in *Survivor* and toppling skyscrapers in *Fight Club* (50). However, Palahniuk's later publications, including *Fight Club II* and "Fight Club for Kids," revitalize the horrific into the transgressive to generate a distinctly postmodern literary amalgam. He has altered the perception that texts within the horror genre can mostly frighten, terrify, and scare by extending the meaning of King's "sick" to include the vulgar, obscene, profane, producing a revolutionary culmination, the visceral feeling of panicked disgust. In this sense, the sick joke that once made audiences shake their heads now causes them to cringe in genuine disdain. The content of "Guts," "Knock-Knock," and "Cannibal" are certainly examples of how Palahniuk has taken "horrifying" to a different aesthetic level.

Furthermore, Palahniuk must not necessarily situate the horrific within gothic or darkly ominous situations to produce a terrifying effect. In his fiction, ordinary and commonplace settings amplify the horrific effect, and there are ample illustrations to demonstrate this in his work. His story "Loser" follows a Zeta Delta Omega sorority coed who has ingested Hello Kitty blotter acid at *The Price Is Right* game show and has made the showcase round. The coed offers a "million, trillion" (48) as her bid—"probably it's the Hello Kitty" (48)—and loses to an elderly grandmother, who, so ecstatic she has won, dies in the story's last sentence: "Saying 'Thank you,' right up to when her granny eyes roll up backward inside her head, and her hand grabs at her the sweatshirt where it covers her heart" (49). This is not a King climatic ending driven by the presence of the supernatural. In the case of the whacked-out sorority sister, readers most likely feel an unsettling embarrassment, as when someone has broken some sacrosanct unspoken yet required etiquette rule, and everyone notices except that person. The story "Romance" provides a

better example, particularly when the mentally-challenged yet sexually attractive Brit pelts fellow bus passengers with her bloody tampon. While smacking travelers with the gory cotton she screams, with child-like playful conviviality, "Puppet show! Magic trick!" (75). The Andy Mingo film clip of this on *YouTube* as "PUPPET SHOW" is worth viewing. There are always uncomfortable looks on students' faces when I have shown this clip during a meeting. If King is the master of horror, Palahniuk is his equal in transgression. Whereas King's fiction taps into his audience's collective storehouse of archetypal fears and phobias, Palahniuk mines his readers' socially and culturally influenced senses of moral obligation, and then he challenges readers by pushing them toward uncomfortable reactions. Palahniuk makes his readers feel uneasy through their identifications with the characters, not because they fear a resurrected baby, a possessed car, or a violent werewolf (as in King's stories). To offer a *Fight Club* analogy, just as Tyler Durden splices images of penises, vaginas, and other sexually explicit slides into the films he projects, causing audiences to feel discomfort as a result of split-second glimpses of pornography (29-31), Palahniuk offers horrific scenes that disturb precisely because they are interspersed so strategically within plots that each person could identify as ordinary and commonplace, as real and actual, what any person could, would, or might experience. In other words, readers could certainly occupy places within Palahniuk's fictional neighborhoods.

After laying the groundwork through all of this theory—trust me when I emphasize this preparation is time well spent—the transition to Palahniuk's *Fight Club* is easy. As the students and I move through *Fight Club* and *Fight Club II*, we address various critical ways of treating the texts, and I cultivate discussion of issues related to gender, feminist, psychoanalytical, Marxist, and other critical interpretations as they arise. I admit that I keep the focus on postmodern parody and minimize other interesting and valid approaches to these rich texts. All of the theoretical preparation has been made through the King/Palahniuk comparisons, and although other criticisms are relevant, attention to them is not warranted if there are only a couple weeks or so left to get through the three *Fight Club* texts. I inform students up front that my intention is for us to explore how Palahniuk plays with parody within the boundaries of his own creative universe. We begin with the "Afterword," included in the Norton edition of *Fight Club*, in which Palahniuk discusses how his novel has infiltrated popular culture. He mentions how Limp Bizkit included Tyler Durden

on its website, how Office Depot used the Paper Street address in its labels display, how *Saturday Night Live* staged a "Fight-Like-A-Girl Club" skit, how media co-opted fight club to function as a metaphor for a wide range of meanings (211-12). Palahniuk acknowledges that others have parodied his creative brainchild. Likewise, we explore how *Fight Club* has attained almost master narrative status, a master copy from which social and cultural duplications have been spawned. Many students usually confess they know *Fight Club* through the 1999 film, and I always need to warn that the end of the novel is not the same conclusion in the film. Students often report they know of or have even participated in spin-off fight clubs, actual fight clubs. At this point, I provide instances from newspaper reports of fight clubs across the country, verifying the proliferation of fight clubs through articles such as "Real-Life Fight Club in San Jose Pits Men Against Each Other in Dangerous Hand-To-Hand Combat," "Fight Clubs Hit High-School Locker Rooms," "Sixth-Graders Expelled for 'Fight Club,'" and "Utah Shadowboxes with 'Fight Club' Phenomenon." Palahniuk even cites in his "Afterword" how fight clubs were active in Utah (211).

I begin conversation about *Fight Club* by asking students to treat it as a horror story, and I probe for comparisons between this novel and horror movies or television programs that include similar plots. Of course, someone invariably makes the connection between the narrator—usually identified as Joe (as he will be for the remainder of this essay) because of the several self-reflexive designations, such as "I am Joe's Prostate" (58)—and Tyler to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. This helps us to begin discussing the traits of the novel that relate to the traditional horror genre. Many students generally point out that the typical horror movie paradigm pits good against evil, likely demonic or satanic evil. Students will have no difficulty seeing Joe as someone dissatisfied with his place in the world and searching for something better. They realize he is uncomfortable in his position as a product recall specialist for an automobile company. They will notice he goes to support groups as an outsider trying to get relief for his own personal malaise; his affliction is his psychological—neither biological nor physiological—inability to form strong personal relationships, and he finds no solace in purchasing status commodities validated through consumer capitalism. The complexity begins with Tyler Durden and Marla Singer. Students who read closely will pick up that Joe's alter ego is Tyler, figuring out that Joe and Tyler never seem to be with Marla at the same time in the Paper Street house and that Joe's constant fatigue is actually

from Tyler's activity while Joe is asleep. Most of the time, students will view Marla as either a catalyst for the action in the novel or as an agent that ties the two dual personalities together. They will understand how fight club grows out of the support groups as well as Project Mayhem forming from fight club. I can always tell which students have read the novel or relied on the film version when we discuss the ending. The last chapter of the novel is nebulous, but that is from Palahniuk's brilliance as an artist. To reiterate, there are many critical paths to take when teaching *Fight Club*, but for the purpose of addressing postmodern parody, I hold off on going down one direction too far, allowing students to pursue those routes more comprehensively in their course essays.

When we start *Fight Club II*, students notice the absence of comedy associated with postmodern parody. They initially see the text as a sequel, moving forward from where *Fight Club* left off, but then they realize Palahniuk is diverging in different creative directions from where the first book ended. I ask students to reflect on Hutcheon's definition of postmodern parody, with the emphasis on the comparisons *as well as* the differences. The art of Cameron Stewart and colors of Dave Stewart combine the language of the hard copy with the visuals of the film version of *Fight Club* to transcend a simple sequel toward something more emblematic of the "repetition with critical distance" allowing for "ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity" defined by Hutcheon as postmodern parody. The "critical distance" could be influenced by the number of years, almost two decades, separating *Fight Club* from *Fight Club II*.

Needless to say, Palahniuk changed as a writer from the first to the second version, and his evolving perspective comes out in *Fight Club II*. The narrator of *Fight Club* is now named Sebastian, who is married to Marla and has a son, completely domesticated as a suit-wearing, middle-aged businessman with a receding-hairline, facing problems such as remembering his wedding anniversary and caring about the care of his yard, growing from Generation X sensibilities into post-911 responsibilities. As students confirm, seeing this is different from reading this, and the graphic-novel format may even make this tale more visually horrific in the King sense. As a student pointed out last semester, a reader only has to look at the confused babysitter holding a butcher knife (10) and the intelligent-yet-misunderstood child (11) to feel firmly planted in a horror-movie fictional atmosphere, as these are almost staple ingredients for 1970s and 1980s slasher films. Palahniuk's depiction

of Marla as more strongly feministic, wearing a pant-suit, accessorizing with pearls, sporting red lipstick and nail polish, and donning a popularly conservative hairstyle starkly contrasts with the desperately neurotic, yet interestingly bohemian, darkly attired Marla in the previous version. Both Marlas smoke incessantly. In *Fight Club II*, Marla triggers the return of Tyler by contaminating Sebastian's medications so his sleep will summon his spiritual nemesis, who, to Marla's delight, is a sexual stud. Marla now drives the plot instead of serving as a secondary character within it, and her anti-terrorism combat missions with the progeria victims and other support group participants (more aptly considered a paramilitary coalition) carries over in the sphere of fantasy. Students will comment on the visual sex scenes between nearly nymphomaniac Marla and Tyler (25, 84, and 155), but they will more so respond to the visual image of Big Bob's massive breasts swaying as he runs (115-16) because of gynecomastia resulting from steroid abuse as a body builder.

Palahniuk's decision to morph Big Bob and Chloe into seemingly supernatural entities is hallmark King. Big Bob is now a monster, with Hulk-like physicality and summoned through the chant "His name is Robert Paulson," imitating the repetition when Big Bob was martyred for Project Mayhem in *Fight Club* (176). Palahniuk obviously panders to the traditionally horrific in this context, offering no full-frontal glimpse of the character and allowing sideway and back views that reveal half of his skull is missing. Just as Big Bob is resurrected from his death in *Fight Club* (177-78), Chloe's return from the grave, after her sister has announced her death (35), is just as miraculous. Inevitably, students will find these changes ridiculous, but this subsides somewhat after I ask them to consider how they frequently suspend their disbelief when watching a King horror film. A now-elderly Chloe, wearing combat attire and handling a weapon, is laughable, as are seeing all of the other support-group commandos parachuting from planes, one biting a knife as she plunges through the air and another gripping a wheelchair attached to a parachute (191). Chloe was a young woman yearning intimacy in *Fight Club*, and Palahniuk merges her character with Brandon Whittier in *Haunted*—described in "Dog Years" as the thirteen-year-old genius with progeria (113)—to justify her elderly physique. These images of old, sick, decrepit people fighting a demonized Tyler reflects how preposterous this pseudo-horror story has become. This is heightened by allusions made to Joseph Campbell anthropology and various mythologies (6) as well as references to Vikings, Edgar Allan Poe, and Charles Manson

(223). There is even a nod at John F. Kennedy conspiracy theory (138-39) plus Biblical parallels with Adam and Eve, with Tyler as the snake (218), and Moses and his wandering flock (66, 256). Students will notice the obvious social commentary, and it is worth pointing out that King also takes stabs (pardon the pun) at various social conventions in his films.

The question raised ultimately by this exercise is why Palahniuk would parody *Fight Club*? I always invite students to ask this important query. As a result, close investigation of the texts uncover Palahniuk is doing something much more complex than students realize. His meta-commentary undoubtedly indicates his motives. Palahniuk appears as a character after Marla and Chloe have attempted to locate the son by frequenting versions of fight clubs. Literally repeating what he describes about adaptations in his "Afterword," Palahniuk cites "Bite Club," "Pint Club," "Raw Fuck Club," and "Film Club," embedding in a caption box, "Fun Fact—The real-life fight clubs cited here all have names inspired by the original *Fight Club*" (87). Palahniuk is with five of his workshop colleagues in the "Write Klube" (88), and he informs Marla not to bother them "unless the plot lags" (89). Referring to the good versus evil motif, Palahniuk provides Sebastian's family tree to illustrate how Tyler has served as the agent of doom for every generation of Sebastian's male ancestors, mapping out a framework of moral destruction (201), which in turn sets up Tyler archetypally as the Antichrist. Palahniuk's call to Sebastian forecasts his demise: "You've been beaten by your wife, your neighbor, by the relic . . . even your son" (233), and the phone going dead signals the cataclysmic end of humankind (235). One of Palahniuk's colleagues conveys sarcastically her discontent with the way the plot is heading: "This was cute the first time. Now, I don't know" (230), and the others—similar to some students—question Palahniuk's authorial choice, especially when he exclaims in finality, "Happily ever after!" (242). Readers holding copies of *Fight Club II*—one holding a noose (247)—call for a better ending, and the author confesses, "In the book, the ending was different" (248), only to have a confused participant ask, "Wait—There was a book?" (249).

All of this undermines the entire validity of *Fight Club II* as a horror story. The self-reflexivity and meta-commentary deconstruct all that has been established through *Fight Club* and then what has served as its continuation in *Fight Club II*. Not surprisingly, many students will agree with their fictional surrogates that the ending is too contrived, or, as one student commented, too much of a farce comparable to the *Scary Movie* spoofs.

Palahniuk's accommodation with an alternative only re-establishes the fairy tale conclusion, with good clearly defeating evil as broadcast through the stone lettering on the beach: "We H8 Tyler" (257). This is short lived, as students are shocked when Tyler shoots Palahniuk in the head, causing a splattering spray of blood, bone, and viscera to be depicted in bright orange, yellow, and red. The image of the exploding head is notably gruesome (262), and it points back to a similar image when Sebastian's head is destroyed (19-20). Both images recollect King's claim about the "gross out." Palahniuk's aim is not to horrify in either location. He grants his readers the benefit of the doubt to be smarter and more familiar with his work than to try to frighten them with such tricks. If readers laugh at the end, this is the nervously anxious chuckle, the kind expressed at the sick joke because it is dually humorous and disgusting.

In this manner, Palahniuk proves King's contention that readers of this type of fiction are "mentally ill." Readers crave the horror film in much the same way they need the transgressive story. Responding to something that is socially taboo and culturally prohibited is often instinctual. Speaking not about transgression but sexuality (although he also comments on the transgressive), Michel Foucault argues that something will be reciprocally desired as strongly as it is repressed. Responding to this paradox as the "repression hypothesis," Foucault states, "We have not only witnessed a visible explosion of unorthodox sexualities; but—and this is the important point—a deployment quite different from the law, even if it is locally dependent on procedures of prohibition, has ensured, through a network of interconnecting mechanisms, the proliferation of specific pleasures and the multiplication of disparate sexualities" (49). Translated, once something is off limits, it is desirable. King and Palahniuk understand this contradiction—the more something is repressed, the more attractive it becomes—and they offer readers glimpses into the forbidden, as King says, to "keep the gators fed," albeit these are beasts inhabiting their psyches. Palahniuk's recreation of the ending of *Fight Club* as almost an addendum attached to the end of *Fight Club II* allows readers to reconcile the dualities of good and bad (or any other problematic binaries), tying together loose ends in the first book.

Students will notice immediately that Marla's pregnancy softens her as a character and intensifies the romance between her and Joe. In this graphic remake of *Fight Club*, Marla tells Joe that she witnessed him murder Patrick Madden, she outs him at a bowel

cancer meeting at the First Methodist Church, and she reveals an understanding of his split personality (195-205). Joe is also helped by Marla and the others from the support groups. As mentioned previously, students are often confused by the final chapter, but Palahniuk takes away the mysticism by placing Joe in a psychiatric ward receiving shock therapy. Mulling over Joe's plan, a physician says to the assistant, "To think that a small team of amateurs could topple the world's tallest building! That's textbook crazy" (276). After reading that caption, a student once replied, "This shows me we are all crazy, and 'normal' is only a setting on a washing machine." The "Fight Club Ending Redux" finishes with an orderly who resembles Tyler inferring Durden will return (276). Palahniuk leaves the door open for readers to think about just how "textbook crazy" this may be, and he may be leaving readers to ponder the possibility of something similar occurring in ordinary circumstances, blurring the line between actuality and illusion, what is real and what is fantasy.

After reading *Fight Club* and *Fight Club II*, readers will identify the postmodern parody in "Fight Club for Kids." Those viewing this video without knowing the referents may find the clip funny, but they will miss the meaning fostered by all the differences between the texts. Self-deprecating and a little reticent to be on camera, aware of continuous off-camera direction, Palahniuk introduces himself and claims he is essentially only the author of *Fight Club*. Because, as he says, his readers are getting older, having children, and eventually dying, Palahniuk wants to remarket his story for a new, younger audience, so he is advertising his latest book, *Fight Club 4 Kids*. Palahniuk is obviously parodying himself in this approximately three-minute video, and with music associated with children's programs and comics that look like children's drawings, he tells the tale of a marginalized young boy who decides to join the "Horsing Around Club." Often getting excited, which leads to cursing and subsequent apologies for his indiscretions, Palahniuk proclaims phrases from *Fight Club* such as "Start a fight" and "You are not your khakis." After displaying a list of rules that mimic those of fight club, Palahniuk shows two disturbing images of characters violently inflicting so much physical injury that blood soaks through one boy's shirt and blood pools around another's prostrate body. After showing a picture of a rainbow—framing a line of middle-aged men instead of children—Palahniuk reads, "The horse play would go on until it was done, and everyone who did it would have fun." The most disturbing point in the video

is when a character looking like Jared Leto becomes, as Palahniuk describes, a "purple, bloated, chewed-up, bubble-gum looking [person] covered in blood head to toe." Palahniuk concludes with "They all lived happily ever after . . . Believe it or not." This last sentence is crucial to the meaning of the entire presentation. Unfortunately, all of that is believable, as there have been national reports of a "baby fight club" comprised of one-year-olds in Virginia in 2016 ("Day Care") and a "toddler fight club" pitting four-year-old to six-year-old children against each other in New Jersey in 2015 (Monzon). I connect this to the other reports of real fight clubs. Palahniuk's "Believe it or not" is ironic: life imitates art.

Describing his insomnia, Joe comments, "Everything is so far away, a copy of a copy of a copy" (21). By showing students how Palahniuk revitalizes King's ideas and then how Palahniuk remakes *Fight Club* through *Fight Club II* and "Fight Club for Kids," I teach them how parody is not simply a comic imitation, but, in terms of postmodernism, a recreation that calls attention to differences through the similarities. Palahniuk develops many of King's points about horror in his own essays about transgression, hence transforming the horror tale into the transgressive story. The link between King and Palahniuk is also illustrated through Palahniuk's sequence of *Fight Club*, *Fight Club II*, and "Fight Club for Kids." Palahniuk wants readers to construct meaning by detecting the similarities between the texts, but he also expects them to reconstruct new meanings by considering the differences between them. Keeseey states that Palahniuk was influenced mostly by King's *Night Shift* and *Carrie*, but he also says Palahniuk's literary debt to King is largely implicit concerning his gothic stories. He notes Palahniuk borrowed the name Cassie Wright from King's *Carrie*—the school principal frequently mispronounces Carrie White's name as Cassie Wright—for his porn star heroine in the novel *Snuff* (82). Keeseey writes, "Disfigured and deformed bodies also feature prominently in horror, and given Palahniuk's affinity with this genre, his fiction could certainly be read within the context of the horror or Gothic tradition, . . . However, Palahniuk's novels should be understood as belonging to a particular strand within the gothic, an increasingly popular trend toward embracing rather than abhorring rebellion and transgression" (13). King and Palahniuk are similar, but they are also different, and just as with postmodern parody, the significance is in their difference. Indeed, to play off of Palahniuk's words, the transgressive fringe has found its place in the American mainstream. Just like King, Palahniuk is achieving major counter-culture intellectual

prowess in and out of college classrooms, and he has certainly earned his place on American literature syllabi. From my experience, students enjoy making the comparison between King and Palahniuk as well as looking at Palahniuk's parody in the various *Fight Club* texts. Students learn that the study of American literature goes well beyond Melville, Twain, and James.

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