

POSTMODERN REPRESENTATION OF REALITY IN CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT

The article gives an outlook of some works by Chuck Palahniuk, a modern American writer, who writes in the genre of alternative prose. As a postmodern author Palahniuk widely uses such features of postmodernism as irony, black humour, parody, simulacra&simulation, pastiche, metafiction, fragmentation and non-linear narratives, paranoia and so on. Palahniuk's works above all else represent sharp social satire. The characters are often marginals alienated by society and reacting with self-destructive aggressiveness ('transgressional fiction' according to the author). Palahniuk is a master of depicting the dark and depraved underbelly of our society through the voices of mordantly existential protagonists. He dissects tumours of society in a most outrageous way, protesting against its hypocrisy, as well as uprising against unspirituality of modern way of life.

Keywords: Chuck Palahniuk, transgressional fiction, society, horror, postmodernism



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რეალობის პოსტმოდერნული წარმოდგენა ჩაკში

აბსტრაქტი

სტატიაში მოცემულია თანამედროვე ამერიკელი მწერლის ჩაკ პალანიუკის ზოგიერთი ნაწარმოების ხედვა, რომელიც წერს ალტერნატიული პროზის ჟანრში. როგორც პოსტმოდერნი ავტორი, პალანიუკი ფართოდ იყენებს პოსტმოდერნიზმის ისეთ მახასიათებლებს, როგორც ირონია, შავი იუმორი, პაროდია, სიმულაკრა და იმიჯები, პასტიში, მეტაფიქცია, ფრაგმენტაცია და არანაირი ნარატივები, პარანოია და ა.შ. გმირები ხშირად მარგინალური არიან საზოგადოებისგან გაუცხოებული და რეაგირებენ თვითდესტრუქციული აგრესიულობით (ავტორის აზრით, „ტრანსგრესიული ფანტასტიკა“). პალანიუკი ჩვენს საზოგადოების ბნელი და გარყვნილი ნიალის გამოსახვის ოსტატია სასტიკი ეგზისტენციალური გმირების ხმებით. ის საზოგადოების სიმსივნეებს ყველაზე აღმშფოთებლად ქრის, აპროტესტებს მის ფარისევლობას, ასევე აჯანყდება თანამედროვე ცხოვრების არასულიერების წინააღმდეგ.



INTRODUCTION

Chuck Palahniuk is an American writer of Ukrainian origin, who lives in Portland, Oregon. He began writing fiction in his mid-thirties. His first book has not been published due to his disappointment with the story. When he attempted to publish his next novel, *'Invisible Monsters'*, publishers rejected it for being too disturbing. This led him to work on his most famous novel, *'Fight Club'*, which he wrote as an attempt to disturb the publisher even more for rejecting him. For this work in 1997 he won two awards: Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award and Oregon Book Award for Best Novel. A revised version of *'Invisible Monster'*, as well as his fourth novel, *'Survivor'*, was published in 1999, allowing Palahniuk to become a cult figure himself [9]. A few years later Palahniuk managed to make his first *'New York Times'* bestseller,

the novel *'Choke'*. His further novels *'Lullaby'* (2002), *'Diary'* (2003) and *'Haunted'* (2005) were also a success with the 2003 Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award for *'Lullaby'*. From then on, Palahniuk's later books would often meet similar success. Such success has allowed him to go on book tours to promote his books, where he reads from both new and upcoming works and where people are reported to faint while listening to the readings.

His works above all else represent sharp social satire. The characters are often marginals alienated by society and reacting with self-destructive aggressiveness ('transgressional fiction' according to the author). However, Palahniuk's books are not to everyone's taste. While consistently funny in their own way, they are also caustic, vicious, disturbing and sometimes downright repulsive.

The central theme in his first four books is 'the identity crisis' thing, the invention of self, which goes hand in hand with the question he is repetitively asking in practically all his narrative: Is this marvellous edifice of civilization that we have created really the best thing for humankind? Or is there something dark, unknown, malevolent and untamable in the human's mind that can tear apart the foundations of modern existence? He is not totally against the Status quo, but claims that we should always question the Status quo and never take anything at face value. Starting with *'Lullaby'*, his novels have been satirical horror stories.

Palahniuk is one of the most popular novelists of Generation X and he is already known as a 'literary genius', 'torchbearer for the nihilistic generation' and 'cult author' [4]. Being a postmodern author Palahniuk widely uses in his novels such features of postmodernism as irony, black humour, simulacra and simulation, pastiche, metafiction, fragmentation and non-linear narratives, paranoia and so on. This article will make an attempt to discuss some of the above mentioned features applicable to C. Palahniuk's works.

ANALYSIS OF THE NOVELS

All scholars agree that postmodern literature is difficult to define. It's the combination of narcissism and nihilism, so to say, weird for the sake of being weird. Postmodernist fiction is characterized by its temporal disorder, its disregard of linear narrative, its mingling of fictional forms and its experiments with language. However, unifying features often coincide with Jean-Francois Lyotard's concept of the 'meta-narrative', Jaques Derrida's concept of 'play', and Jean Baudrillard's 'simulacra'.

Let's first discuss the concept of metafiction, which is essentially writing about writing or making the artificiality of art or the fictionality of fiction apparent to the reader [2]. It is often employed to undermine the authority of the author, for unexpected narrative shifts, to advance a story in a unique way, for emotional distance, or to comment on the act of storytelling. Some common metafictional devices include: a work of fiction within a fiction; a novel about a writer creating a story; a novel about a reader reading a novel, etc. Palahniuk's 'Haunted' is the best example of the novel about creating art at any cost. It can be compared to *'The Canterbury Tales'* or *'The Decameron'*, since there is a framing story: for three months a group of writers would live in utter isolation, producing the work they'd been dreaming of, the writing they all swore they'd be able to finish if only the world wasn't keeping them from it. Instead of paradise they get an abandoned old theater, where they become locked inside until they have completed their masterpieces. Each person tells a story and all of them are too worried about how their story will be told and imagine how they will be surrounded by people wanting to pour money over them for the rights to their stories for movies and books. They suffer immensely but they are ready to suffer even more to be able to tell about it later on. In fact, it's a satire about reality TV and preoccupation with having our own stories,

but most of all it's a satire about human nature. About our need to be seen, to be pitied, to be acclaimed for our suffering. And, what is more, to be paid for it.

Secondly, Jean Baudrillard's *'simulacra and simulation'* is most known for its discussion of images, signs, and how they relate to the present day. Baudrillard claims that modern society has replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, and that the human experience is of a simulation of reality rather than reality itself. The simulacra that Baudrillard refers to are signs of culture and media that create the perceived reality; Baudrillard believed the simulacra that society has become so reliant on that it has lost contact with the real world on which the simulacra are based [1]. Simulation turns a model into reality and vice versa. We live in the virtual reality, in the world of signs and images, surrounded by trademarks and ads, in Matrix. From industrial age we've moved into the information age. Baudrillard calls it a shift into hyperreality in which simulations have replaced the real. In postmodernity people are overloaded with information, technology has become a central focus in many lives, and our understanding of the real is mediated by simulations of the real. For example, Palahniuk's 'Lullaby' presents characters bombarded with a 'white noise' of television, product brand names, and clichés. This postmodern, hyperreal information bombardment in the long run kills people turning them into zombies:

"George Orwell was wrong. The Big Brother doesn't keep an eye on you. The Big Brother sings and dances. Takes white rabbits out of the magic hat. All the time while you're not asleep, the Big Brother entertains you, distracting your attention. He does everything not to give you time to think about something important. He does everything to destroy your imagination" [7, p.23].

When the imagination of all people is atrophied nobody will want to change the world. Palahniuk hopes that "only when the Big Brother stops overloading our brains, people will learn to think" [7, p.75].

Mass media nowadays plays a crucial role in forming and reflecting public opinion: media connects the world to individuals and reproduce the self image of society. At the same time media weaken and delimit the individual's capacity to act autonomously, as it was perfectly predicted by George Orwell in his dystopian novel '1984'.

In its turn there are very many parallels between C. Palahniuk's 'Lullaby' and R. Bradbury's 'Fahrenheit 451', the most important of which is the fear of technocratic future. 'Fahrenheit 451' was written in 1953. However, the themes raised there are still relevant. Palahniuk in 'Lullaby' goes to the extremes and develops the idea up to the mystical phantasmagoric plot. Bradbury describes wall-sized TV screens that cram you with commercials, loud music, interactive soap operas, etc. Palahniuk does the same:

"Somebody is singing downstairs. Not even singing, rather yelling the words of a song. Bang, bang, bang upstairs. It's necessary for all these people to listen to the radio, TV or tape recorder. These are the people who are afraid of

silence. They are my neighbors. Sound-addicts. Silence-phobes”[7, p.23].

And then it goes like in agony. People can hardly hear themselves speak:

“You make your music louder to jam the noise. Neighbors make their music louder to suppress your music. And so it goes. Everybody buys stereo systems. The more powerful the better. This is the arms race in the sound war”[7, p.25].

Thirdly, it’s common for postmodernists to treat serious subjects in a playful and humorous way. Thus irony, along with black humor and the general concept of ‘play’ (related to Derrida’s concept or the ideas advocated by Roland Barthes) are among the most recognizable aspects of postmodernism. In Palahniuk’s ‘Lullaby’, for instance, we find:

“People hear the commercial of chips with dill and run to buy it; now it is called the freedom of choice”[7, p.29].

Very often the narrative of Palahniuk’s works is structured around a long series of similar ironies. Sometimes the author provides prime examples of playfulness, often including silly wordplay, within a serious context. For instance, he calls Cinderella Sinderella, implying her sins. Some other wonderful examples of irony and black humour relating to excessive consumption and occupation by mass media can be found in ‘Lullaby’:

“The mass media, the culture, everything laying its eggs under my skin. Big Brother filling me with need. Do I really want a big house, a fast car, a thousand beautiful sex partners? Do I really want these things? Or am I trained to want them? Are these things really better than the things I already have? Or am I just trained to be dissatisfied with what I have now? Am I just under a spell that says nothing is ever good enough?”[7, p.256].

Such themes as globalization and as a result the revolt against total unification of people can be met in practically any of Palahniuk’s books. For instance, in ‘Invisible Monsters’ we read:

“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 anyway we could imagine to escape would be just another part of the trap. Anything we want, we’re trained to want”[5, p.256].

‘Survivor’ dwells upon this topic as well:

“We all watch the same TV programs. We all hear the same things on the radio, we all repeat the same talk to each other. There are no surprises left. There’s just more of the same. Returns. We all grew up with the same TV shows. It’s like we all have the same artificial memory implants. We remember almost none of our real childhoods, but we remember everything that happened to sitcom families. We have the same basic goals. We have the same fears”[8, p.118].

And finally in ‘Fight Club’ the author rises against consumerist spirituality of the modern world with its detailed description of modern reality:

“You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple

years you’re satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you’ve got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug. Then you’re trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you”[6, p.253].

Fourthly, pastiche as a combination of multiple genres to create a unique narrative, can also be found in C.Palahniuk’s works: for example, he uses science fiction, detective fiction and fairy tale in ‘Lullaby’. Though pastiche commonly refers to the mixing of genres, many other elements are also included (metafiction and temporal distortion are common in the broader pastiche of the postmodern novel). The narratives of Palahniuk’s books often start at the temporal end, with the protagonist recounting the events that led up to the point at which the book begins. ‘Lullaby’ used a variation of this, alternating between the normal, linear narrative and the temporal end after every few chapters. However, exceptions to this narrative form include the more linear ‘Choke’ and ‘Diary’. There is often a major plot twist that is revealed near the end of the book which relates in some way to this temporal end (what Palahniuk refers to as ‘the hidden gun’). His more linear works also include similar plot twists.

Fifthly, a characteristic feature of Palahniuk’s books is a stream of consciousness narrative, which is another token of postmodernism. In what the author refers to as a minimalistic approach, his writings use a limited vocabulary and short sentences to mimic the way that an average person telling a story would talk. In an interview, he said that he prefers to write in verbs instead of adjectives. Repetitions of certain lines in the stories’ narratives (what Palahniuk refers to as ‘choruses’) are one of the most common aspects of his writing style, found dispersed within most chapters of his novels.

The last but not least feature of postmodernism worth discussing in relation to Palahniuk’s fiction is paranoia. All his books are infected with it. Below the examples from ‘Lullaby’ and ‘Fight Club’ will be discussed.

The Lullaby, the song printed in a book for children has the ability to kill people either being sounded out or through the unspoken wish. It’s a ‘culling song’- an ancient African spell for euthanizing sick or old people. Investigating the Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, the main character, Carl Streater, the reporter, who accidentally killed his own wife and child with this song, finds out that the book was published in 500 copies. So he starts traveling around the country trying to destroy the dangerous books. The problem is that Carl doesn’t need to read the song to recite the eight simple lines. He can accidentally memorize it, and the temptation to use it is becoming too much. Sometimes he doesn’t have to even say the words aloud, just direct them at a person. And then...silence: the man dies. Palahniuk paints the future in dark colors:

“The Lullaby will become the plague of our time – the age of information technologies. Imagine the world when people don’t watch TV, don’t listen to the radio, don’t go to the cinema, don’t surf in Internet, don’t read newspapers and magazines. They’ll put special plugs into their ears – like

they put on condoms now. Imagine the plague which can be picked up by ear. Words can kill now. New death can come from wherever: from a song, a commercial, a press-release. Millions of people will watch some TV show and will die next morning, because in the middle of it there was a commercial. Can you imagine the panic: the burning books, video- and audio tapes, TV- and radio sets. People will avoid any sound that can contain death. TV and radio air will be silent. Only a few, thoroughly checked pieces of information will be broadcast. Any music, book or movie first will be tested on animals or volunteers before being put into the mass. Can you imagine the world of deep silence. No more motorcycles, lawnmowers, jets, electrical mixers or hair dryers. The world here people are afraid of listening. Happy are the deaf ones, since they will inherit the earth”[7, p.55].

Indeed, a million everyday things will suddenly become as dangerous as crossing a minefield. It would change the world, and in that Carl Streater is right. His problems with controlling his need to use the song, his tiredness with living in a world filled with noise make some very pointed comments about our own lives. What if someone tries to convince himself that to use the song for ‘good’ would be OK? People could minimize the risk to their lives having whispered the song in the ears of rapists and terrorists. But how long would they hold out, being ‘good’, being ‘worthy’? How long before they leaned forward and said the song to the man who just nudged them? How long until they scream it aloud in a bank, then pick money of the drawers?

Thus, Palahniuk shows how words can really kill us. But not only literally. The concealed meaning of this is that senseless words, we’re crammed with all the time from TV screen, can kill and stupefy people on a spiritual level.

In its turn the story of ‘*Fight Club*’ is centered around a club where men with good white-collar jobs come together to beat each other senseless. Then they go back to those jobs with blackened eyes and loosened teeth and the sense that they can handle anything. ‘*Fight Club*’ is the invention of Tyler Durden, projectionist, waiter and dark anarchic genius. And it’s only the beginning of his plans for revenge on a world where cancer support groups have the corner on human warmth. ‘*Fight Club*’ is a blend of extreme violence, black comedy and passionate ideas. For the postmodernist no ordering system exists, so a search for it is absurd. Palahniuk fights against the System giving the following explanation:

“We’re sort of raised within parameters, we’re sort of raised to understand what it is to be a good person, and so it seems that so much of our childhood is about meeting the expectations of all of the people around us. Meeting the expectations of our parents, our teachers, our coaches, eventually our bosses, and we’re sort of, you know, always looking outside of ourselves for how to be. And it’s exciting after a certain point in your life when you start to make up rules rather than following the rules, and decide for yourself how you want to be rather than constantly meeting the needs

and the expectations of everyone else”[3].

By his books Palahniuk does not encourage anyone to mine factories, explode bombs or attack embassies. But what he does is that he appeals to people’s consciousness not to take everything for granted, especially things which are imposed on us.

CONCLUSION

All things considered, C.Palahniuk is a truly post-modernist author since postmodernist features in Chuck Palahniuk’s works are presented in many ways: as meta-fiction, simulacra and simulation, irony, black humour and parody, pastiche, non-linear and stream of consciousness narrative and, finally, paranoia. Though the voices of mordantly existential protagonists the author depicts the dark and depraved underbelly of our society, pointing at such corresponding issues as mass culture, environmentalism, globalization, etc. In Palahniuk’s books, the character is always taken out of false contentment and isolation, and returned to society - half-baked, unpleasant, chaotic, but at least a full-fledged society. “We want to go to our own deserted island, away from everyone, to find happiness. And so we get to this lonely place to be alone and find ourselves much more miserable than before. It turns out that you always want to be with people, sometimes alone. When you are married, you want to be divorced. When you are divorced, you want to be married. We never appreciate what we have. My books are always about the return of people to society - people who received this isolation and now hate it”[10]. Human personality is presented as a drifter, alienated from society, obsessed with death, destruction, perverted pleasures and the like.

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