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Chuck Palahniuk's *Haunted*: A Novel of Stories and the Underbellies of American Culture

Abstract. Chuck Palahniuk's *Haunted* is a novel made of stories but also a novel about the tradition of telling stories, particularly those meant to evoke terror and shock, as well as related pleasures. Here, twenty-three tales told by writers trapped in an abandoned theatre flesh out the frame narrative whose key takes the form of the "Nightmare Box," a mysterious apparatus allowing a glimpse into the indescribable (or "the real reality"). The readers, too, are allowed a peek into the nightmare box that the setting of the novel transforms into as its inhabitants, observed and recorded by a Mr. Whittier, the owner of the original device and the mastermind behind the plot, turn to murder, cannibalism and self-mutilation to enhance the effect that the story of their survival will have upon its (and their) release. This article examines the rhetoric of the unclean in the novel with the use of Julia Kristeva's category of the abject and it rereads *Haunted* as both an addition to and a commentary on the canon of works which capitalize on haunted spaces, fragmented bodies and the illusory nature of the lived reality.

Keywords: Palahniuk; *Haunted*; horror; abject; metafiction

In Shirley Jackson's 1959 *The Haunting of Hill House*, a Dr. Montague talks about "houses described in Leviticus as 'leprous,' *tsaraas*," adding that "the concept of certain houses as unclean, forbidden—perhaps sacred—is as old as the mind of man" (2009: 70). His remark alludes to a culturally persistent connection between the affliction (in this case, manifesting as

a skin disease in people, as mildew and mould in buildings and clothing) and transgression: manifestations of *tsara'ath* were read by the rabbis of the Mishnah as more than a physical ailment—it was a spiritual pathology the treatment of which required several cleansing practices and a repentance for sins which may have caused the condition in the first place (sins such as selfishness, evil tongue, pride, murder, adultery and various forms of sexual immorality; *tsara'ath* has been interpreted either as a punishment or, more generally, withdrawal of godliness from the affected site). Explorations of the possible connections between the outward oddities reflecting the supposedly hidden trespasses have continued to inform the Western literary tradition, with the Gothic mode utilizing perhaps to the greatest extent the theme of built environment serving as a mechanism of control over the unacceptable.

Infused with that mode—it has even been posited that “until gothic has been discovered the serious American novel could not begin” and that “of all the fiction of the West, [American fiction] is most deeply influenced by the gothic” (Fiedler 1966: 143, 142)—American prose indeed frequently probes the signifying possibilities of architectural structures. Whether it is the “meditative look” of Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables*, suggesting “that it had secrets to keep,” barred nursery windows and the wallpaper with “bulbous eyes” peeling off the walls in Gilman’s colonial mansion, the cracked facade of Poe’s fallen House of Usher, Faulkner’s decaying manors, or the spiraling corridors and secret passages in Jackson’s novel, the state of the setting has been read by the scholars of literature as symptomatic of the condition of the inhabitants, haunted by the ghosts of their own or collectively repressed pasts, pains and desires, succumbing to or struggling with the anxieties and pressures of the current cultural, political and social crisis. Punter and Byron stress that in literature the Gothic “re-emerges with particular force during times of cultural crisis and . . . serves to negotiate the anxieties of the age by working through them in a displaced form (2004: 39).

What is particularly interesting, however, are the instances of those narratives becoming self-reflective and in this article I hope to explore some of the potential of this turn referring to Chuck Palahniuk’s already infamous 2005 *Haunted: A Novel of Stories*. I take a closer look at the rhetoric of excess, containment and expulsion, and the dynamic of the clean and the unclean structuring the novel, also because they seem to reflect the mechanisms described by Julia Kristeva in the *Powers of Horror*, especially those characterizing “abject” and “abjection,” concepts which may prove useful for both the discussion of cultural hauntings and a rewarding reading of Palahniuk’s novel—Martin and Savoy rightly note that “The entire history

of the gothic lies behind . . . Julia Kristeva's understanding of the abject, that which is 'radically excluded' from individual and national self-definition" (1998: viii). Focusing on the events taking place in a decrepit theater turned into an artists' retreat, which is the setting of Palahniuk's frame narrative, and a selection of interrelated stories within it, I hope to demonstrate that *Haunted: A Novel of Stories* may and should be read as an example of what Kristeva views as a culture's various means of *purifying* the abject. Finally, laying itself bare already with the title which introduces a novel made of stories (whose frame consists of twenty three tales, each preceded by a Chaucerian prologue) but also a novel about stories (an interpretation supported, among others, by the text's numerous references to the processes of writing and storytelling), *Haunted* seems to be an attempt to review the tradition of telling ghost stories, our need to tell them and the occasional desire to become immersed in them. In fact, in its compulsive revisiting of other texts, the novel itself may be said to perform an act of ghosting, drawing attention also to the possible parallels between the Gothic and the postmodern modes in their relation to the questions of epistemological and ontological incertitude, tendency for pastiche and self-reflexivity, delight in excess as well as their potential for camp, bathos and grotesque (see also: Beville, Lloyd-Smith).

The critical reception of the novel has been largely unfavorable, at least in comparison to Palahniuk's other works, such as the award winning *Fight Club* (1996) or the best-selling *Choke* (2001), and the author's public persona, combined with the popularity of his work, may have further affected his critical and scholarly reputation. Kuhn and Rubin cite several claims refuting the value of Palahniuk's writing, including that by Jonathan Dee of *Harper's Magazine* who views it as an exercise in "cheap, high school nihilism" (in Kuhn and Rubin 2009: 2), and others who believe his prose to be a "literary relative of NBC's *Fear Factor*" or a "shtick" based on "rewriting the same book over and over again" (in Kuhn and Rubin 2009: 3). The fact that the first story included in *Haunted* was published initially by *Playboy* (in March 2004) and that in 2009 a New York City teacher was suspended for assigning it to his 11th grade English class (Buffa 2009: n. pag.) has undoubtedly contributed to the notoriety of "Guts" which, as Palahniuk recalls in the Afterword, caused over seventy people to faint during the public readings of the text.

"Guts" is essentially a story describing three instances of masturbation, progressively more inventive and disastrous. The first one involves an attempt at experimentation, performed by "this friend of mine" who, as an adolescent, inserts a carrot into his anus, only to be disappointed by the lack

of expected sensation. Called downstairs for supper, the boy “stashes the slippery, filthy thing in the dirty clothes under his bed” (Palahniuk 2006: 13) and joins the family. He soon discovers that the carrot is gone, as are the clothes which his mother recovered from under the bed to do laundry:

This friend of mine, he waits months under a black cloud waiting for his folks to confront him. And they never do. Ever. Even now he’s grown up, that invisible carrot hangs over every Christmas dinner, every birthday party. Every Easter-egg hunt with his kids . . . that ghost carrot is hovering over them all. (Palahniuk 2006: 13)

This is followed by the account of another “friend” who attempted to insert into his penis a long, thin piece of wax, having heard that it would intensify the pleasure of masturbation. His experiment goes horribly wrong with the boy ending up in hospital, his college fund spent on the surgery to remove the wax-needle from his bladder. He, too, had been called downstairs for supper in the midst of the act: “This wax kid and the carrot kid are different people, but we all live pretty much the same life” (Palahniuk 2006: 15), the narrator remarks as he proceeds to the final part of his tale.

It involves his own habitual masturbation performed underwater while he is immersed in the family swimming pool, except this time the narrator rests his buttocks against the pool inlet hole in order to increase the pleasurable sensation. Instead, he becomes stuck, his intestines sucked by the circulation pump, which the narrator discovers only after a failed attempt to reach the water surface. He is trapped and suffocating, his intestine pulled out of his body as the pump continues to work, and surrounded by:

all this soup of blood and corn [from his last meal], shit and sperm 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. God forbid my folks see my dick . . .

What my folks will find after work is a big naked fetus, curled on itself. Floating in the cloudy water of their backyard pool. Tethered to the bottom by a thick rope of veins and twisted guts. . . Here’s the kid they hoped would snag a football scholarship and get an M.B.A. Who’d care for them in their old age. Here’s all their hopes and dreams. Floating here, naked and dead. All around him big milky pearls of wasted sperm. (Palahniuk 2006: 19)

The narrator manages to free himself by biting off the intestine and adds: “it’s hard to say what my parents were more disgusted by: how I’d got

into trouble or how I'd saved myself. After the hospital my mom said, 'You didn't know what you were doing, honey. You were in shock'" (Palahniuk 2006: 20). The pool is swiftly cleaned by hired help, the mess blamed on the dog. It is only from the last sentences of the story that we learn about another event which may have contributed to the family selling the house and moving to another state, mentioned very briefly: "Then my sister missed her period" (Palahniuk 2006: 21). Neither the swimming pool incident nor the unwanted pregnancy, however, become the subject of conversation. The water in the pool was changed, the girl received an abortion and "my folks never mentioned it again. Ever. That's my family's invisible carrot" (Palahniuk 2006: 21).

Palahniuk's excessive, perhaps shockingly detailed, descriptions of bodily waste (including an orange vitamin pill floating among the discharge) pulled violently out of the body alongside internal organs and fluids involved in digestion and reproduction tell the story of our engagement with what Kristeva refers to as "abject" and "abjection" (discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs). At the same time, positioned firmly within the literary tradition which explores the spheres of prohibition, inhibition and repression, *Haunted* examines numerous social and cultural anxieties revealing in the act the underbellies of contemporary culture. Savoy notes that "Gothic texts return obsessively to the personal, the familial, and the national pasts to complicate rather than clarify them, but mainly to implicate the individual in a deep morass of American desires and deeds that allow no final escape from or transcendence of them" (2002: 169). The stories in *Haunted* ("Footwork", "Slumming" and others), and the frame narrative itself, contain numerous crucial socio-economic referents, easily overshadowed by what is seen as the sordid, self-gratifying and perverse character of the book, and of Palahniuk's writing in general. Meanwhile, the novel operates rather as a "palimpsest, revealing the traces of a narrative of commodification and consumption" (Sonser 2001: 2) and addresses an entire range of issues marking the everyday of contemporary American life, including unbridled greed, persistent materialism, consumerism, egocentrism, prudishness and hypocrisy saturating the culture still rooted in its Puritan past, the ever increasing power of the mass media, the insanity of celebrity culture and the ongoing processes of objectification of the self and others. In "Green Room" a character is advised that she needs to transform into camera-friendly "content" (Palahniuk 2006: 53). Elsewhere:

We could picture the future: the scene of us telling people how we'd taken this little adventure and a crazy man kept us trapped in an old

theater for three months. Already, we were making matters worse. Exaggerating. . . . No one will say it but Miss Sneezzy's death would make a perfect third-act climax. Our darkest moment. . . . Then, as completion, Miss America would name her new child Miss Sneezzy, or whatever her first name has been. A sense of the circle mended. Of life going on, renewed. Poor, frail Miss Sneezzy. In the movie-book-T-shirt story, we'd all love Miss Sneezzy. . . her deep courage . . . her sunny humor.
Sigh. (Palahniuk 2006: 84–86)

Ultimately, Sonser notes, “the essential horror of the gothic is not goblins and vampires but its latent power to address the disenchanting world of production and the commodification of the social” (2001: 12–13).

Consequently, “Guts” is more than a source of cheap thrill or an exercise in nihilism of which it has been accused: the “apparition” of the carrot hovering above countless dinner tables in America, humorous as it is, signals also the presence and nature of sanctions regulating human (in this case, teenage) sexuality, while the issues of production, reproduction, abortion and overproduction invite a more detailed investigation of the novel whose frame focuses, among others, on the processes of writing and storytelling. The parallel setting of “Guts”: an idealized “picket-fence ranch house,” with a four-door Buick parked outside, where “pacing the front yard is a man, pushing a lawn mower” (Palahniuk 2006: 10), and the stage of an abandoned theatre where the starved and mutilated walking cadavers present their stories, begs the question of the possible origin of Palahniuk's haunts, preceded by a necessary gloss on the novel's highly intertextual and self-reflexive character.

Haunted opens with a quotation from “The Masque of the Red Death” foreshadowing both the theme of containment and the mood of the work: as in Poe, where the castle doors are welded shut, Palahniuk's aspiring writers are forcibly confined within the walls of a building where “much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the *bizarre*, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust” will be taking place (Poe in Palahniuk, n.pag.). The Gothic and creative themes are alluded to several times via numerous references to Villa Diotati but another, perhaps even more significant literary connection runs (also through Poe) between *Haunted* and Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, where a group of people hides in a secluded villa from the horrors of a city ravaged by the Black Death and engages in a storytelling game in order to pass the time and provide structure to their days. The image on the cover of Palahniuk's novel, originally a ghostly face printed with luminescent ink, in the second

edition uses the portrayal of a screaming female face, and the blurred quality of the picture brings to mind an enlarged detail from an old pulp magazine, relating the work to another popular tradition. But the fact that the features of the portrayed woman, whose eyes and mouth are wide open, bear also a vague resemblance to those of a sex doll should not be ignored either, as one of the stories in *Haunted* describes the fate of life-like dummies used for the practice resuscitation. Entitled "Exodus," it is a story of a bond between the so-called "Breather Betty" doll and a female employee of a police station upon her discovery of the other purposes that the officers use the anatomically correct mannequins for. Modeled on the corpse of a young woman, known as *L'Inconnue: The Mona Lisa of the Seine*, who drowned in Paris over a century ago (and who really did serve as an inspiration for Laerdal's Resusci Anne), Breather Betty—although she is "just a torso with a head. No arms or legs. Rubbery blue lips. Eyes molded open, staring. Green eyes" (Palahniuk 2006: 155)—still has a wig of red hair and eyelashes glued on; in another story, "The Nightmare Box," beautiful, almost doll-like Cassandra Clark cuts off her eyelashes in a gesture whose significance can be fully comprehended only after the contents of the mysterious box are revealed. Following the formula of story within a story, many of the embedded tales correspond to the themes of the frame narrative which include also the significance of storytelling and the need to experience and refigure contents which are to be abjected outside the frame of art. The second edition of the novel carries a warning in the form of a mock "parental advisory" sticker printed in the top left corner.

"To each ego its object, to each superego its abject," Kristeva notes (1982: 2), emphasizing the role of the agency of prohibition and punishment in deciding what is to be "ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (1982: 1) into the sphere of the taboo: abject and abjection (from *abjectus*: thrown down, cast away, from *abdicere*: to throw away, cast off, degrade, humble, lower) refer to the processes of expulsion and to what had to be repelled or banished since its presence evokes an unbearable mixture of repulsion and fear. To be precise, it is not as much the lack of cleanliness that leads to abjection but rather the ambiguous status of the abject: of bodily excretions (blood, pus, saliva, sperm) which are no longer *me* but are still *of me*, or of the corpse (or ghost or zombie)—no longer a subject but clearly not just an object, or of a body which has lost its form, become disfigured, drastically changed or mutilated. Notably, what is abject is undifferentiated, positioned "outside the set": blurring some of the fundamental distinctions between the outside and the inside, between the I and the Other, the human and the non-human, it draws us "towards the place where meaning collapses"—the actual source of fear—

from which it also continuously beckons and fascinates desire (Kristeva 1982: 1–2). The processes of abjection are crucial for the mapping of the clean and proper self and of the social structures: “by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder” (Kristeva 1982: 12–13). Thus,

Abjection appears as a rite of defilement and pollution in the paganism that accompanies society with a dominant or surviving matrilinear character. It takes the form of the exclusion of a substance (nutritive or linked to sexuality) the execution of with the sacred since it sets it up.

[It] persists as *exclusion* or taboo (dietary of other) in monotheistic religions, but drifts over to more “secondary” forms such as *transgression* (of the Law) within the same monotheistic economy. It finally encounters, with the Christian sin, a dialectic elaboration, as it becomes integrated in the Christian Word as a threatening otherness. . . (Kristeva 1982: 17)

Consequently, cultural narratives, whether verbal, visual, religious or literary, serve to negotiate and manage the persistent and ubiquitous eruptions of the abject into our lives. Contained by the boundaries of the ritual or fiction (or the cinema hall, or the theatre stage), “safe” or sanctioned interactions with the abjected are a way of purifying it through an “impure process that protects from the abject only by dint of being immersed in it”—“one does not get rid of the impure; one can, however, bring it into being a second time, and differently from the original impurity” (Kristeva 1982: 28). Ritual and art are a method to renew the original contact with the abject which is later radically excluded (for instance by averting the gaze from the movie screen) as the boundaries of the self become reinforced and the subject’s position in relation to the symbolic clearly redrawn.

Before they begin the process of bringing impurity into being a second time, and differently, the characters of *Haunted* descend “into the foundations of the symbolic construct” (Kristeva 1982: 14). Their bus is steered first “down a tight, dark alley,” one “so narrow that you can’t see down any length” and when the vehicle stops, its door slowly opens to reveal another door, made of steel, and behind it, “a slot of pure nothing. Just black. The slot just wide enough to squeeze through” (Palahniuk 2006: 26–27). Entering what resembles a monstrous womb (in genre fiction female reproductive functions are among the major sources of the abject while

rituals of defilement frequently aim to “ward off the subject’s fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother”; Kristeva 1982: 64), they are met by “the needle-sharp smell of mouse urine” (Palahniuk 2006: 27) mixed with the smell of “an old, damp book half eaten by silverfish” and “with the smell of dust” (Palahniuk 2006: 27). Hit with a bright spotlight which makes “the dark more dark than black” (Palahniuk 2006: 27), they are yet unaware that from now on their every move is going to be filmed by the hidden cameras installed by a Mr. Whittier and that the entrance is going to be sealed shut for several weeks. Once this is discovered and confirmed with utmost certainty, even destroying available food supplies does not effect the characters’ release, forcing them instead to resort to other means of finding sustenance, such as cannibalism.

As the events begin to unfold, it is revealed that Mr. Whittier designed more than a plan to entrap his guests. “The Nightmare Box” makes a reference to a black apparatus “on three tall legs” resembling a nineteenth century camera:

fitted along every seam with complicated moldings, ridges and grooves, that made it look heavy as a bank vault. . . . “Like a little coffin,” somebody in the gallery said. . . . If you wanted to make the box work right, you held both handles. You pressed your eye to the brass peep hole in the front. Your left eye. And you looked inside. . . .

On a little brass nameplate, a plate screwed to the top of the box, if you stood on your tiptoes, you could read “The Nightmare Box.” And the name “Roland Whittier.” The brass handles were green from people holding tight, waiting. The brass fitting around the peephole was tarnished with their breath. The black outsides were waxed with grease from their skin rubbing, pressed close. (Palahniuk 2006: 214)

The gallery owner does not know the exact content of the Box but once in a while its ticking mechanism falls silent and what it reveals makes a promising student “sit on his bed all day, cockroaches crawling in and out of his clothes, his pant legs and shirt collar . . . his head circled with houseflies” (Palahniuk 2006: 215). Another time it is an antiques dealer whom the police finds dead: “In the tiled bathroom, where any mess would be easy to clean up, he’s knotted the cord around his neck and then just—relaxed” (Palahniuk 2006: 217). Having looked into the Box also Cassandra Clark is allowed to catch “a glimpse of the real reality”: “What’s in the box is proof that what we call life isn’t. Our world is a dream. Infinitely fake. A nightmare”

(Palahniuk 2006: 222). It is that experience which causes Cassandra to cut off her eyelashes:

She's away and looking at the blank television screen. Maybe looking at herself reflected there, naked in the black glass. . . . Her eyelashes gone, her green eyes looking dull and fake because you never see her blink. (Palahniuk 2006: 211)

Soon, she disappears for several months only to be found walking down a highway, starved, missing fingers and toes, and covered in blood, all of which is revealed to result from self-mutilation performed at Mr. Whittier's retreat:

One dinner, just the two of them at the kitchen table, Mrs Clark asked, did Cassandra remember the Nightmare Box? Did that night in the gallery have anything to do with her disappearing?

And Cassandra said, "It made me want to be a writer." (Palahniuk 2006: 347)

The inside of the Nightmare Box is where the meaning collapses, disturbing identity, system and the established order. The sensation it evokes defies description but is compared to the *jouissance*-like experience of witnessing a flock of birds bursting suddenly out of a cage into the sky:

this white chaos. This storm exploded up from the center of the picnic . . . For the countless hours of that one long moment they forgot everything and watched the cloud of white wings twist up into the blue sky. They watched it spiral. And the spiral open. (Palahniuk 2006: 222)

But while a momentary immersion is meant to protect us from the "original impurity" and result in a cathartic effect, in *Haunted* those subjected to the effect of the real reality (also Kristeva associates the abject with the intrusion of the Real into our lives) are unable to bring the sensation into being a second time, differently from the original impurity, and reconfirm the boundaries of existence. Cassandra is killed by her own mother who cannot cope with "that girl robot who could sit all day, painting the blue jays that just screeched outside the window" (Palahniuk 2006: 350). While another aspiring writer confirms that "scary" stories work by echoing "some ancient fear," recreating "some ancient terror. Something we'd like to think we're grown beyond . . . something you'd hoped was healed" (Palahniuk

2006: 343) and several of Mr. Whittier's prisoners successfully recreate such terrors on the theatre stage, we know very little of their fate as they leave the retreat (with the notable exception of Miss Sneezzy, who stubbornly refuses to die of allergies and is ultimately murdered by the others.) This failure seems salient especially as for some readers *Haunted* itself may be an experience in abjection, a kind of a Nightmare Box whose excess is sorted and portioned into chapters and tales within tales.

Highly self-reflexive and morbidly ironic, Palahniuk's extravaganza of impurity, abjected bodily fluids and mutilated body parts is, thus, both an addition and a commentary on the literary tradition which capitalizes on haunted spaces and minds, fragmented bodies and the illusory nature of the lived reality. And while in some aspects it may seem to question the purifying effect of the rite of defilement, it nonetheless reveals, as the horror genre and the Gothic mode do, the existence of numerous repressed areas of the present cultural moment and several pressing issues haunting contemporary American culture.

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