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Cold War Kids in Neoliberal Dystopia:

Transgression, Disruption and Fragmentation in the

Work of Chuck Palahniuk and Victor Pelevin

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Introduction

"Russia not amused at Red Army statue re-invented as Superman and friends

Clenched teeth in Moscow over 1950s war memorial in Sofia given makeover by spray-painting street artist"[1]

"Sofia's communist war monument after a colourful makeover replacing troops with Superman, Robin, Santa, and Ronald McDonald. Photograph: Stoyan Nenov/Reuters"[2]

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[1] The Guardian article, 22nd June 2011.
Source: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/22/russia-red-army-memorial-painted
[2] ibid.

Both born in 1962, in the peak period of geopolitical tension dividing the West and the East (marked by the nuclear threats of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the building of the Berlin Wall and the Sino-Soviet split), two authors 'from each side of the Wall' would grow up to become highly influential contemporary writers of global impact and relevance. With literary careers developing from the first decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, both Chuck Palahniuk (USA) and Victor Pelevin (Soviet Union; Russia) started resonating new and exciting possibilities of post-postmodernist developments. While considerable theoretical attention has already been given to both Palahniuk and Pelevin, my research intends to explore their works through a comparative lens, offering fresh insights into the shared literary frameworks that bind them. This comparative analysis seeks not only to highlight the commonalities in their depictions of contemporary life but also to understand how their respective geopolitical backgrounds guide their narratives. Living and working in countries that were equally shaped by and contributed to the narratives of the Cold War, as well as the economic and geopolitical climate of the time, they provide a valuable opportunity to compare the similarities in literary tendencies that result directly from the political, social, and cultural acceleration in the age of overwhelming information flow and predominantly trash culture. By analyzing and comparing their work within the context of global politics, neoliberal economic models, and the post-truth age, this dissertation aims to highlight their shared literary techniques and themes. It examines whether and how, in two pivotal oeuvres from the last years of the 20th century, signs of literary trends that would flourish in the first decades of the 21st century can already be discerned. I interpret these works as phenomena of a transitional period, significant for formulating a recognized movement that emerges from it, which I have termed *hypertrashrealism*.

Note on the Text

As the language of this dissertation is English, most of the included quotations are provided also in English. However, as several of Victor Pelevin's novels and two books by Ilya Kabakov have not been translated into English yet, I have either read

them in my mother tongue, Serbian, or in German, while the submitted quotes come in the original language of these books, that is, the Russian language.

Problem Statement and Justification of the Research Project

Postmodernism, officially inaugurated as a literary movement in the USA only to be spread worldwide, has long been one of the prevailing frameworks across different fields of art and culture, as a direct response to the post-World-War-II reality. Following the revolutionary changes in narrative brought by modernism, it developed into a powerful and diverse artistic paradigm, with a new twist in its attempt to speak out for the voices of the transitional period.

These literary voices were predominantly shaped by the aftermath of World War II and its catastrophic impact, the lurking horrors of potential nuclear wars, both suppressed and implied by the ongoing war in the domain of soft power – the cultural and scientific war as the established non-violent battlefield in the Cold War era.

During this time (in the second half of the 20th century), the pace of changes started speeding up dramatically on all levels, leaving less and less time for an average human being to adapt, evolve or even simply comprehend new layers of human existence and identity. Naturally, all these complex political, social, economic, and technological accelerations mirrored themselves in the literary narratives of postmodernism, that are by now facing their own ultimate exhaustion.

Upon stepping into the 21st century – the century overshadowed by the consequences and threats of climate change, by more localized yet almost permanent small-scale wars and conflicts, by forever deepening class divisions, by renewed and new geopolitical tensions, as well as by acute human adaptation to human-machine interaction and our existence in virtual spaces, we are facing a need to find an alternative for the term *postmodernism* for defining the narratives within our cultural space.

"It may well be that as the century ends Postmodernism is on the wane. If so, it will undoubtedly remain an influential and revealing phase not just in the history of American literature but of twentieth-century writing generally – a

deep-rooted search for a late Modern form and style in an age of cultural glut that has been called an age of no style"[3]

Problem Statement

As we progress into the second decade of the 21st century, from a literary standpoint, we find ourselves at a historic juncture, approximately one hundred years after the peak of the modernist *stream of consciousness* that revolutionized literary style and form. Postmodernism appears to have reached a point of saturation, suggesting that all has been said, leaving only remixes and repetition in a perpetual loop of intertextuality. Nevertheless, with new developments in literature taking place, there is a growing consensus that the rich legacy of the 20th century's modern and postmodern narratives should be acknowledged as foundational – though not definitive – for our era. The sociocultural frameworks of the last century are not directly applicable to our current reality, which is difficult to comprehend amid an onslaught of constant informational disruption. This reality suggests not a massive narrative shift or a complete abandonment of postmodern elements in contemporary literature but rather a step beyond the recursive 'post' prefixes (modernism – postmodernism – post-postmodernism) that have dominated discourse.

Justification of the Research Project

We are at a crucial stage in recognizing, defining, and naming new literary movements. This has been particularly noted by theorists examining both contemporary American and Russian literature. In the case of American literary movements since the end of the Cold War, the term *post-postmodernism* has often been employed to describe the collective direction, while Russian literature post-Soviet Union – within the post-Cold-War context – has been characterized by many independent smaller movements within the remaining paradigm of postmodernism, as

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[3] Richard Rutland and Malcolm Bradbury. *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature,* New York: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 392.

detailed by Epstein[4]. Ellen Rutten, in her search for a unifying thread, highlights *New Sincerity*[5] as not just a specific movement characterized by nostalgia and sentimentality but also as a wider paradigm applicable to both Russian and global literature that warrants further exploration.

> "Among these developments, more than one critic singles out a new sincerity as the new cultural adagium."[6]

By observing the synchronicity of postmodernism with the Cold War, my research examines the first post-Cold-War decade as a transitional and indicative period for understanding the evolution of literature into the 21st century. Focusing on the exemplary works of Palahniuk and Pelevin, which are emblematic of this formative decade, this analysis explores how their narratives evolved from the transitional period of the 1990s into the 21st century. The dissertation goal is to identify and define the emergent elements of a literary movement that, while currently categorized under the expansive label of post-postmodernism or the outdated term postmodernism, calls for a more distinct and contemporary nomenclature.

Hypothesis and Objectives of the Study

Anticipating the New Dystopias

> "Capitalism and radicalism have both had to reconstruct themselves, thereby changing our progressive expectations. The avant-garde is no longer avant, but our political, technological, social and artistic philosophies remain as perplexed as ever by the ironies, paradoxes and indeterminacies of a universe science has opened to much vaster exploration. We are abundant in commodities, clever in the creation of systems; we multiply the technologies of information, the

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[4] Mikhail N. Epstein, "A Catalogue of New Poetries", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, pp. 145-151.
[5] Ellen Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism, A Cultural History,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.
[6] ibid., p. 7.

powers of artificial intelligence, the channels of global interaction. All our stories have changed, but the fundamental task of stories – to help us discover for us the meanings we need and the tracks of the imagination down which we might reach them – remains, but anxiously, the same."[7]

Building on Richard Rutland and Malcolm Bradbury's insights into the transformative power of storytelling amidst the complexities of contemporary existence, we venture into examining how the altered fabric of capitalism shapes the backdrop against which new dystopian narratives unfold, reflecting our era's unique socio-political and technological landscape.

The post-Cold War era, much like postmodernism itself, has witnessed capitalism's metamorphosis from a predominantly Western phenomenon to a global reality, transcending its own ideological confines. The once stark divides between West and East have dissolved, giving way to a world where market forces predominate, fueling the resurgence of nationalism and diminishing the influence of traditional ideologies. We now find ourselves in a *post-truth era*,[8] characterized by the ascendance of *alternative facts*, and supported by an arsenal of advanced technologies.

In *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia*, Peter Pomerantsev[9] describes a post-truth society in Russia as one where the distinction between truth and fiction has been obliterated, creating a reality where all narratives are interchangeable and the most critical currency is not fact, but the ability to manipulate and control information. This society is characterized by a media landscape used as a tool for state power, where the simulacrum of democracy is maintained through a constant flux of contradictory messages. Similarly, US scholars from different fields have examined the post-truth phenomenon through a lens that includes media fragmentation, cognitive biases, and echo chambers. In *Zombie Politics*

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[7] Richard Rutland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature,* New York: Penguin Books, 1991, pp. 392-393.

[8] "*Post-truth* seems to have been first used in this meaning in a 1992 essay by the late Serbian-American playwright Steve Tesich in *The Nation* magazine", *Word of the Year 2016,* Oxford Languages, 2016. Source: https://t.ly/shxMO

[9] Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia*, New York: PublicAffairs, 2014.

and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism, Henry A. Giroux[10] critically examines how the convergence of media culture, neoliberalism, and consumerism contributes to the erosion of democratic values and critical thinking, fostering a post-truth society. He argues that the blurring of reality and spectacle in media, coupled with the devaluation of education and critical pedagogy, diminishes the public's ability to discern truth from falsehood. This environment, dominated by market ideologies and a focus on disposability, transforms citizens into consumers and de-emphasizes the importance of factual accuracy and informed political discourse, paving the way for misinformation and manipulated narratives.

The term *post-truth* itself was popularized and became more widely discussed in the political and public realm around the time of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In her book *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President— What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*,[11] Kathleen Hall Jamieson discusses the intersection of social media, disinformation, and American politics, particularly focusing on how these dynamics played a role in the victory of Donald Trump. The rise of Donald Trump and the accompanying neo-fascist sentiments catalyzed a renewed interest in dystopian literature, highlighted by George Orwell's *1984* topping sales charts.[12] This phenomenon invites us to draw parallels between historical and contemporary forms of totalitarianism and dystopia, and to consider the relevance of such narratives in today's East-West dynamics.

In the Newsweek article, *A Kind of Fascism Is Replacing Our Democracy*,[13] Sheldon S. Wolin's argues that post-9/11, the U.S. has shifted towards a form of *inverted totalitarianism* under the Bush administration. This new form of totalitarianism is characterized by unrestrained power in the guise of fighting terrorism, fostering political apathy, divisiveness, and corporate influence over government, akin to totalitarian regimes but uniquely American in its manifestation. His theory of

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[10] Henry A. Giroux, *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism*, London: Peter Lang, 2011.
[11] Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President – What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
[12] Source: https://qz.com/1956937/george-orwells-1984-is-topping-amazons-best-sellers
[13] Sheldon S. Wolin's, *A Kind of Fascism Is Replacing Our Democracy*, New York: Newsweek, 18th July 2003.

inverted totalitarianism, further elaborated in his work[14] posits a unique form of totalitarianism that evolves not through overt actions or an explicit political agenda, but through subtle and gradual transformations within a democratic framework. Unlike classical totalitarianism, which is characterized by a centralized, dictatorial regime and an ideology that dominates all aspects of public and private life, *inverted totalitarianism* emerges in a seemingly democratic context where corporate power and political elites subtly manipulate and control the political process. This form of governance maintains the illusion of democracy and freedom, while actually limiting genuine democratic participation and putting major political and economic decisions in the hands of a few elite groups. This process is facilitated by a constant state of war or fear (as started during the Cold War and reiterated with the ongoing War on Terror), which justifies the expansion of state powers and the erosion of civil liberties, leading to a scenario where the state increasingly infringes upon the rights and freedoms of its citizens under the guise of national security and stability.

Masha Gessen contrasts such an idea by exploring the resurgence of totalitarianism in contemporary Russia in *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*.[15] Gessen argues that the new totalitarianism in Russia is marked not by a strict ideological doctrine, like the communism of the Soviet Union, but by a politics of nihilism, opportunism, and the cultivation of a pervasive fear that stifles opposition and enforces conformity. Through personal stories and political analysis, Gessen highlights the decline of democratic institutions, the erosion of civil liberties, and the construction of a centralized power that shapes truth to maintain control. They articulate how historical trauma, the failure to establish a shared national narrative after the fall of the USSR, and the manipulation of the desire for stability have led to the acceptance of an autocratic system imposed by Vladimir Putin. Gessen's narrative demonstrates how Russia's journey back to totalitarianism serves as a cautionary tale for other nations about the fragility of democracy and the ever-present potential for its reactionary reversal.

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[14] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism – New Edition*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017.
[15] Masha Gessen, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2017.

With respect to various nuances in detecting new forms of totalitarianism, one thing is certain: the neoliberal economy acts as its main engine. In contemporary dystopian landscapes, corporate dominance and market imperatives quietly usurp democratic processes and individual autonomy, providing a stark contrast to the overtly ideological totalitarian regimes of the past.

> "Neoliberalization has not been very effective in revitalizing global capital accumulation, but it has succeeded remarkably well in restoring, or in some instances (as in Russia and China) creating, the power of an economic elite. The theoretical utopianism of neoliberal argument has, I conclude, primarily worked as a system of justification and legitimation for whatever needed to be done to achieve this goal."[16]

Under neoliberalism, social, political, and media developments can be described as dystopian due to the erosion of the public sphere, where corporate media and the commodification of personal data influence political outcomes and public opinion, often prioritizing sensationalism and profit over truth and public interest. This mirrors the control of information and the suppression of dissent found in classic dystopias. However, unlike old dystopias that featured overtly oppressive regimes, the new dystopia is marked by subtler forms of control: surveillance capitalism, manipulative algorithms, and a façade of choice that masks the diminishing agency of individuals. The rise of social media as a platform for both connection and manipulation is emblematic of this shift, offering unprecedented tools for shaping reality, which can both unite and polarize societies on a scale far greater than what was imagined in earlier dystopian visions.

Zygmunt Bauman's theory on new dystopias revolves around the concept of *liquid modernity*,[17] where change is the only permanence and uncertainty a constant. In this context, individuals face the challenges of navigating life without the traditional structures and supports that previous generations relied upon. Bauman suggests that this fluid state of society leads to a new kind of dystopian reality, marked by

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[16] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 19.
[17] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity,* Cornwall: Polity, 2000.

fragmentation, isolation, and a sense of disempowerment amidst the rapid flow of global capital and information. Susan Buck-Morss, on the other hand, draws from critical theory and her background in social and political thought to understand the contemporary state of society. In her examination of mass culture and aesthetics, particularly in works like *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*,[18] Buck-Morss dissects the visual and narrative elements that contribute to the collective political unconscious. She discusses how the failures of modernist dreams have led to dystopian realities, where the promises of progress and enlightenment are contradicted by instances of mass deception, surveillance, and the decline of public space. Buck-Morss scrutinnizes how historical visions of utopian progress have given way to a complex global reality where the excesses and inequalities of capitalist development stand in stark contrast to the diminishing prospects for collective social action and democratic participation. Her insights into the aesthetic and sensory dimensions of these experiences provide a nuanced understanding of the contemporary conditions that resemble dystopian scenarios. Both Bauman's and Buck-Morss's theories reflect the need to position the examination of new narratives within a spectrum that acknowledges the dissolution of modernist certainty and the fragmentation characteristic of postmodernist discourse, revealing a complex landscape where the grand narratives have collapsed but the search for meaning and coherence persists amidst new forms of social disintegration.

In this context, the pervasive nature of contemporary dystopian narratives acts as a global critique of neoliberal economic policies that have led to increased social inequalities and the concentration of power among economic elites, to the detriment of the broader population. Given the intricate dynamics between evolving global markets, political ideologies, and the technological advancements that shape our understanding of truth, the role of these narratives is crucial as they navigate these turbulent 'polluted' waters, offering stories that not only reveal but also respond to emerging dystopian realities in ways that diverge from traditional postmodernism.

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[18] Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002.

Literary Icons of the Transitional Period and Their Cultural Impact

> "Arson. Assault. Mischief and Misinformation. No questions. No questions. No
> excuses and no lies.
> The fifth rule about Project Mayhem is you have to trust Tyler."[19]

Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, both as a novel and through its film adaptation, has left an indelible mark on contemporary culture, resonating with a generation that sees him as an emblematic voice. A closer examination of his works reveals a transition from traditional postmodernist techniques to a style he terms *transgressive fiction* – a blend of satire and graphic storytelling. Utilizing *in medias res* narration and satirical horror plots, Palahniuk's marginalized characters respond to their environment with extreme forms of disruptive behavior, punctuated by moments of philosophical introspection. This style is in conversation with other contemporary authors who explore themes of societal collapse and individual destruction.

> "I will argue that Palahniuk is not trying to write the 'great American novel,'
> although he is profiling himself as a quintessential 'American' writer in the
> midst of post–Cold War megalomania and celebrated Pax Americana. He has
> taken on a culture that has become so gargantuan, fragmented, and
> differentiated but at the same time so rich, so self-reflexive, so historicized and
> also so mimicked that one novel cannot tell its story in one narrative with one
> dramatic thread."[20]

Chuck Palahniuk's fiction critically dissects post-Cold War America, where traditional narratives of masculinity, success, and the American Dream are in crisis. His narratives, laden with disillusionment and a search for meaning, critique the hollow consumer culture that prompts a quest for genuine identity.

In Palahniuk's America, a rampant consumer culture supplants true identity with branded lifestyles. This backdrop sets the stage for his characters' subversive

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[19] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 125.
[20] Eduardo Mendieta, "Surviving American Culture: On Chuck Palahniuk"*,* in: *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005, pp. 394-395.

defiance against a society perceived as regressive since the Cold War's end. Palahniuk paints a picture of an America torn between self-awareness and ignorance, with media spectacles and illusory choices masking a deeper yearning for connection. His works reflect the disorienting experience of contemporary America, where individuals grapple with competing narratives to find their place within or outside of them.

Associated with a literary movement known as transgressive fiction, Palahniuk's work is pivotal in examining the blend of postmodernism with newer literary forms, as he dissects the disillusionment with traditional narratives and societal structures that postmodernism often leaves unchallenged. His importance lies in his exploration of the darker sides of individualism and consumerism – themes that postmodernist works tend to engage with only at a surface level. By taking these explorations deeper, Palahniuk's novels act as a bridge to contemporary literary developments that grapple with the aftermath of postmodernism's fragmentation and irony. His characters, often alienated and struggling against societal norms, reflect a search for meaning in the post-postmodern landscape, carving out a space for new kinds of storytelling that reflect the complexities of 21st-century life.

On the other hand, the post-Soviet literary landscape, transformed by the tumult of history and the infusion of global cultural currents, became fertile ground for various literary movements grappling with the theme of redefining Russian identity. Victor Pelevin stands out in this era, crafting narratives that weave through the labyrinth of post-Soviet life with transgressive flair and a touch of irony, reflecting on the transformation and the search for self in a newly capitalist Russia.

“Протест – это бесплатный гламур для бедных.” [21]

Pelevin, mirroring Chuck Palahniuk's critical lens on post-Cold War America, scrutinizes the Russian transition from a rigid, communal society to one marked by individualism, consumerism, and the echoes of Western influence. His works, while complex and philosophically rich, attract a diverse readership, balancing critical acclaim with widespread popularity.

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[21] Виктор Пелевин, *Batman Apollo*, Москва: Эксмо, 2013, p. 183.

As Russia grappled with its new identity, movements like New Sincerity emerged, pointing to a cultural shift towards earnestness and away from the cynicism of postmodernism.

> "What is the meaning of this growing fascination in contemporary Russian youth culture, media, and art with the alleged Soviet traits of idealism, sincerity, and futurism? How is it linked with the general trend in Russia today of turning away from postmodern irony and cynicism? And what does this aesthetic turn tell us about the ideological shifts in contemporary Russia? To answer these questions we must analyze the context of ideological and geopolitical transformations in which younger generations of Russian cultural producers have found themselves in the past twenty years. […] The utopian world that discourse envisions is neither Soviet nor neoliberal; it belongs to a different system altogether. If this sentiment can be compared with nostalgic yearning, it is yearning 'not for the Communist past, but rather for what that past might have been, for the missed opportunity of creating an alternative world.'"[22]

Pelevin's engagement with the New Sincerity discourse, particularly in his work *S.N.U.F.F.,* positions him both within and apart from it, prompting a deeper look at its varied interpretations. His narrative stance serves as a commentary on the broader ideological changes within post-Soviet society, questioning the authenticity of the past and the possibilities of the future.

In his nuanced portrayal of a Russia in flux, Pelevin captures the essence of a nation at a crossroads, with his characters embodying the tension between typically postmodern cynicism and sentimentality as the desire for an unrealized utopia. This interplay of sentiments is central to understanding the post-Soviet, post-Cold War era, as it encapsulates the complex interweaving of history, culture, and the individual quest for meaning in the aftermath of seismic political change. Pelevin's significance in literature extends beyond national boundaries, as he probes the transition from

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[22] Alexei Yurchak, "Post-Post-Communist Sincerity: Pioneers, Cosmonauts, and Other Soviet Heroes Born Today", in: *What Is Soviet Now?: Identities, Legacies, Memories*, Edited by Thomas Lahusen and Peter H. Solomon, Jr., Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2008, pp. 257-276.

postmodern narratives to those that resonate more profoundly with the contemporary human condition, revealing a global literary evolution.

Defining Hypertrashrealism: A New Literary Movement

As we grapple with the legacies of 20th century and face the specters of new totalitarian forms dissected by thinkers like Zygmunt Bauman,[23] Susan Buck-Moriss,[24] Sheldon S. Wolin,[25] and Masha Gessen,[26] we're ushered into the post-truth era characterized by Peter Pomerantsev[27] and Kathleen Hall Jamieson.[28] This backdrop sets the stage for a transformation within postmodern narratives that bridge Western and Eastern paradigms, suggesting the emergence of hypertrashrealism – a movement that reflects a nuanced embrace of history and historical memory, especially in relation to the phenomena of trash and trash culture.

Hypertrashrealism will be examined in two ways, as an evolution and a disruption of Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality.[29] For the first approach, Justine Pickard's *Crapularity*,[30] Florian Cramer's *Crapularity Hermeneutics*[31] and Joseph Mozur's *crapocracy* (*dermokratiia*)[32] resonate, as a redefined notion of 'low' and 'no'

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[23] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity,* Cornwall: Polity, 2000.

[24] Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002.

[25] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism – New Edition*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017.

[26] Masha Gessen, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2017.

[27] Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia*, New York: PublicAffairs, 2014.

[28] Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President – What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

[29] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.

[30] Justine Pickard et al, *Alternatives to the Singularity, A Collaborative Presentation for/by Grumpy Futurists*, Monoskop, 2011 (online publication).
Source: https://monoskop.org/images/0/03/Alternatives_to_the_Singularity_2011.pdf

[31] Florian Cramer, *Crapularity Hermeneutics,* Rotterdam: Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, 2016.

[32] Joseph Mozur, "Viktor Pelevin: Post-Sovism, Buddhism, & Pulp Fiction"*,* in: *World Literature Today*, Vol. 76, No. 2, Norman: Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, 2002, p. 63.

culture as inherited from Pierre Bourdieu[33] and Theodor W. Adorno.[34] In the same vein, Mikhail Epstein's post-Soviet analysis of hyperrealities[35] and Jeffrey T. Nealon's critique of post-postmodernism[36] draw from Fredric Jameson's discussions on capitalism and postmodernism,[37] indicating a new layer of intensification in contemporary culture.

For the second approach, we will observe the tension between the elements of hyper, trash and realism, as the 'trash' aspect unfolds as a powerful disruptive element across socio-political, ecological, and cultural narratives. From a socio-political perspective, the work of Jennifer Patico[38] highlights the economic transformations within the post-Soviet middle class, unveiling a shift in societal values amidst marketization. Joshua Ozias Reno's environmental critique[39] expands our understanding of waste beyond human-centered views, while Gay Hawkins[40] scrutinizes the interaction between humans and waste.

The cultural implications of trash emerges as an opportunity for rediscovery and reassessment of value. In *Cultural Economies of Waste*,[41] Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke challenge the binary perception of waste, proposing it as a potent cultural force. Patricia Yaeger's exploration of trash as a literary archive[42] reveals its

[33] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984.

[34] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", in: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno and Gunzelin Schmid Noeri, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020, pp. 94-136.

[35] Mikhail Epstein, "The Dialectics of Hyper, From Modernism to Postmodernism", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, pp. 3-30.

[36] Jeffrey T. Nealon*, Post-postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.

[37] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.

[38] Jennifer Patico, *Consumption and Social Change in a Post-Soviet Middle Class,* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.

[39] Joshua Ozias Reno, "Toward a New Theory of Waste: From 'Matter out of Place' to Signs of Life", in: *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 31, No. 6, London: Sage Publications, 2014, pp. 3–27.

[40] Gay Hawkins, "Plastic Bags: Living with Rubbish", in: *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Volume 4 (1), London: Sage Publications, 2001, pp. 5-23.

[41] Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, "Introduction: Cultural Economies of Waste", in: *Culture and Waste, The Creation and Destruction of Value,* Edited by Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, pp. ix-xviii.

[42] Patricia Yaeger, "Trash as Archive, Trash as Enlightenment", in: *Culture and Waste, The Creation and Destruction of Value,* Edited by Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, pp. 103-116.

capacity to preserve marginalized histories and personal narratives, casting it as a form of resistance against commodification. Aleida Assmann's analysis[43] of cultural memory's shifting media – from textual permanence to the impermanence of traces and artifacts – echoes the transformative influence of technology on memory practices.

Boris Groys' commentary[44] on the avant-garde and the use of readymades spotlights a leveling between the highbrow and the low, questioning the value ascribed to artistic originality. On the other hand, Linda Hutcheon's *historiographic metafiction*[45] and Ellen Rutten's interpretation of *New Sincerity*[46] highlight a reinvigorated interest in historical realism and a move towards genuine engagement with contemporary and historical realities. This renewed realism, devoid of naivety, acknowledges the fragmented and mediated condition of the world it seeks to represent.

In summary, hypertrashrealism emerges from a matrix of theoretical insights and critiques, marking a departure from postmodern playfulness to a serious engagement with the *real*, albeit through a lens that recognizes the indelible impact of media on our perception of history and the present. This approach reconciles a critical awareness of the constructed nature of historical truth with a forward-looking exploration of new forms of realism that navigate the complexities of a media-saturated society and the development of various forms of virtual reality.

Objectives of the Study

In light of the problem statement and preceding discussion, my doctoral research seeks to answer the following questions:

- How have themes of transgression, disruption, and fragmentation evolved in the works of Palahniuk and Pelevin from the postmodern to the contemporary era?

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[43] Aleida Assmann, "Texts, Traces, Trash: The Changing Media of Cultural Memory", in: *Representations*, No. 56, Special Issue: The New Erudition, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, pp. 123-134.
[44] Boris Groys, *On the New,* London: Verso Books, 2014.
[45] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism, History, Theory, Fiction*, London: Routledge, 1988.
[46] Ellen Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism, A Cultural History,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.

- How does the distinct writing style in the works of Chuck Palahniuk and Victor Pelevin suggest *hypertrashrealism* as a transnational literary tendency?
- What distinguishes the *hypertrashrealism* from modernism and postmodernism?

Research Methodology and Position within the Research Landscape

This research adopts a multidisciplinary approach, encompassing:

1. **Cultural, Economic, and Political Background Study:**

Before dealing with the relevant theoretical work done in the field of US and Russian postmodernism and post-postmodernism, this dissertation situates itself at the intersection of various critical theories and historical contexts to understand the evolution of postmodern literature, which led towards the movement that I define as *hypertrashrealism*.

In the realm of cultural and economic theory, I first examine the legacy of Jean Baudrillard's concept of *hyperreality* presented in *Simulacra and Simulation*,[47] and its amplification in the contemporary context. By analyzing the theoretical works of David Harvey that deal with the condition of postmodernity[48] and the history of neoliberal capitalism,[49] I draw connections between his insights into the economic policies shaping postmodern reality and what he defines as the *plasticity of the human condition*. Similarly, I position Fredric Jameson's canonical work *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*,[50] where consumerism and commodification are dominant forces, alongside Jeffrey T. Nealon's more recent examination of the intensification of this interconnectivity in post-postmodern thought.[51] With the legacy

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[47] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.
[48] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, *An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change,* Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1990.
[49] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
[50] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.
[51] Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.

of Foucault's *A Preface to Transgression*,[52] exploring the role of limits in social constructs and the shifting boundaries of postmodern narratives, I identify transgression as one of the key elements linking postmodern thought with the subsequent literary narratives.

Supported by the theories from Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*,[53] Susan Sontag's essays *Against Interpretation* and *One Culture and the New Sensibility*,[54] and Lauren Berlant's contemporary theories,[55] I engage with diverse concepts of identity, comparing and reassessing them in light of the authors' anticipatory imagination. Recalling Haraway's feminist critique of traditional notions of identity and her interest in the blurred lines between humans and machines, I explore themes of fragmentation in an era actively grappling with the ethics of AI, android usage, and transhumanism. I respond to Susan Sontag's call to forgo interpretation in favor of embracing the sensory qualities of art, juxtaposed with the challenges of overstimulation in the (post)digital age. And by delving into Lauren Berlant's focus on the affective dimensions of citizenship and belonging, which addresses postmodernism's fixation on individual experiences and societal norms, I investigate the quest for self in an increasingly extreme *selfie reality*.

Politically, I am mainly focused on theories that contextualize the role of fossil fuels in the arena of geopolitics and the era of the Cold War as directly responsible for the developments in postmodernist and post-postmodernist texts. Through McCauley's,[56] Menand's,[57] and Stonor Saunders'[58] work on the history of the Cold War and the respective cultural policies it shaped both in the West and the East, I have

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[52] Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression", in: *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews;* Edited with an Introduction by Donald F. Bouchard, translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977, pp. 29-52.

[53] Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century"*,* in: *Manifestly Haraway*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, pp. 3-90.

[54] Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays,* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966.

[55] Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship,* Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

[56] Martin McCauley, *The Cold War 1949-2016*, London: Routledge, 2017.

[57] Louis Menand, *The Free World – Art and Thought in the Cold War,* New York: Farrar, Straus and Girous, 2021.

[58] Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, London: Granta Books, 1999.

provided a macro view of the geopolitical tensions that have shaped the literature of the time and that bore similar results in post-Cold War US and Russian literature.

Exploring Timothy Mitchell's concept of *Carbon Democracy*,[59] and the role of oil in shaping political power, I point to the literary *oil texts* which followed and their relevance in approaching the environmental reality of the 21st century. By including Noam Chomsky's critical examination of media[60] and power dynamics,[61] supporting the connection between geopolitical tactics and the control of available resources, I examine a postmodern skepticism towards grand narratives and authority, a skepticism that hypertrashrealism inherits and amplifies.

In the exploration of new totalitarianism and dystopian narratives, key theorists provide valuable insights. David Harvey's[62] critique of neoliberalism aligns with Sheldon S. Wolin's concept of *inverted totalitarianism* where democracy is overshadowed by plutocratic influence. Similarly, Masha Gessen[63] highlights a resurgence of totalitarianism in post-Soviet Russia, marked by opportunism and oligarchic dominance. Zygmunt Bauman's idea of *liquid modernity*[64] depicts a society fragmented by global capitalism, while Susan Buck-Morss[65] discusses dystopian outcomes as a reaction to failed modernism, emphasizing mass deception and democratic erosion. Daniel Cojocaru[66] points to *inefficiency of violence* as a means of subversion and renewal in the new dystopian narratives, focusing on themes of control, rebellion, and the transition to new forms of power in a hyperreal environment.

By interlinking the legacy of Cold War and neoliberal capitalism in the US and post-Soviet Russia, I paint an evolution of soft power through the evolution of 'low' or 'no culture,' as inherited from postmodernism and characterized by cultural theorists

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[59] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, London: Verso, 2011.
[60] Noam Chomsky, *Interventions*, Open Media Series, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2007.
[61] Noam Chomsky and Gilbert Achcar, *Perilous Power: The Middle East and US Foreign Policy, Dialogues on Terror, Democracy, War and Justice,* London: Penguin Books, 2007.
[62] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 88.
[63] Masha Gessen, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2017.
[64] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity,* Cornwall: Polity, 2000.
[65] Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002.
[66] Daniel Cojocaru, *Violence and Dystopia, Mimesis and Sacrifice in Contemporary Western Dystopian Narratives*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015.

like Pierre Bourdieu[67] and Theodor W. Adorno,[68] towards explosion of trash culture as explored by contemporary theoreticians as Samantha Bradshaw & Philip N. Howard,[69] Sergey Sanovich,[70] Kevin Glynn,[71] Adele Marie Barker,[72] and Eliot Borenstein.[73]

Collectively, these works paint a complex picture of intellectual thought that is framing my contextualization of the evolution from postmodern to hypertrashrealist literature. They underscore both the continuity and the split between the two movements, highlighting how technological, economic, and cultural shifts lead the way narratives are constructed, deconstructed, and perceived in contemporary literature.

2. **Evolution of American and Russian Postmodern and Post-postmodern Narratives:**

In the realm of literary postmodernism, I have explored its heritage and evolution to the present day. John Barth's pivotal manifesto, *The Literature of Exhaustion*[74] marked the 1960s as a crucial period when postmodernism officially emerged as a recognized movement, emphasizing the rise of metafiction. New narrative elements, such as intertextuality and fragmented narratives, were introduced during this era. Susan Sontag, from the same decade, attributed these developments to contemporary experiences like extreme social mobility, commodification and the mass reproduction of art objects.

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[67] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984.

[68] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", in: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno and Gunzelin Schmid Noeri, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020, pp. 94-136.

[69] Samantha Bradshaw & Philip N. Howard, "Troops, Trolls and Troublemakers: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation", in: *Computational Propaganda Research Project,* Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute, 2017, pp. 1-37.

[70] Sergey Sanovich, "Russia: The Origins of Digital Misinformation", in: *Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media*, Edited by Samuel C. Woolley and Philip N. Howard, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 21-40.

[71] Kevin Glynn, *Tabloid Culture: Trash Taste, Popular Power, and the Transformation of American Television*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

[72] Adele Marie Barker, "Rereading Russia", in: *Consuming Russia*, *Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, Edited by Adele Marie Barker, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 3-11.

[73] Eliot Borenstein, "Public Offerings: MMM and the Marketing of Melodrama", in: *Consuming Russia*, *Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, Edited by Adele Marie Barker, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 49-75.

[74] John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion", in: *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*, London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984, originally published in 1967, pp. 62-76.

Expanding on Gerald Graff's[75] and Stanley J. Grenz's[76] insights, I explored fragmentation, a central postmodern element resulting from media advancements and information overload. This shift marked a departure from earlier Romantic and modernist beliefs in literature's transformative power, as outlined by Graff. Dr. Mary Klages termed this shift *mini-narratives*[77], indicating a rejection of grand narratives. I also revisited Fredric Jameson's theory linking late capitalism to postmodernism,[78] comparing it to Mark Fisher's concept of Capitalist Realism,[79] which deepened our understanding of the ties between contemporary capitalism and literature.

To contextualize US postmodernism, I drew insights from works anticipating the end of postmodernism, such as Richard Rutland's and Malcolm Bradbury's *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*[80] and Linda Wagner-Martin's *A History of American Literature 1950 to Present.*[81] Wagner-Martin emphasized the significance of events like the end of the Cold War and 9/11 as defining breaks from traditional postmodernism. This aligns with Linda Hutcheon's concept of *historiographic metafiction*,[82] addressing the neglect of history in recent literary examination. To broaden our perspective, I drew insights from *American Literature in Transition, 1990-2000,* edited by Stephen J. Burn,[83] and *American Literature in Transition, 2000-2010*, edited by Rachel Greenwald Smith,[84] providing an overview of new poetries, particularly post-postmodern works. Mitchum Huehls[85] highlighted the renewed interest in history as a crucial element distinguishing post-postmodernism from its

[75] Gerald Graff, "The Myth of the Postmodern Breakthrough", in: *Critical Essays on American Postmodernism,* Edited by Stanley Trachtenberg, New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1995, pp. 69-80.
[76] Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996.
[77] Dr. Mary Klages, *Postmodernism,* Boulder: University of Colorado, 2001.
[78] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.
[79] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative*, Ropley: O Books, 2009.
[80] Richard Rutland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*, New York: Penguin Books, 1991.
[81] Linda Wagner-Martin, *A History of American Literature: 1950 to the Present*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.
[82] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism, History, Theory, Fiction*, London: Routledge, 1988.
[83] Edited by Stephen J. Burn, *American Literature in Transition, 1990-2000*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
[84] Edited by Rachel Greenwald Smith, *American Literature in Transition, 2000-20I0*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
[85] Mitchum Huehls, "Historical Fiction and the End of History", in: *American Literature in Transition, 2000-20I0*, Edited by Rachel Greenwald Smith, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 138-151.

predecessor. Additionally, we observe narratives influenced by virtual spaces, exemplified by *electronic literature* presented by Brian Kim Stefans.[86]

In my research, I focused on detecting elements of postmodernism that remain relevant while acknowledging its evolution. Key concepts included Scott Bradfield's transgression in American Romance,[87] Lauren Berlant's narratives on gender politics and national identity,[88] Steven D. Scott's exploration of the *gamefulness* of American Postmodernism[89] and Laurie Vickroy's depiction of *trauma narratives*.[90] I also referenced the notion of Yuppie Postmodernism by David Kaufmann,[91] the post-war generational cult obsession identified by Anna Sobral,[92] and the obsession with artifice, spectacle, dreck, and kitsch, as detected by Paul Maltby.[93] In my analysis, I have highlighted Philip Stevick's argument, which advocates for finding a better name than post-postmodernism for the emerging new fiction.[94] Additionally, I examined the growing fascination with trash through contemporary theories like Justin Pickard's *Crapularity*[95] and Florian Cramer's corresponding *Crapularity Hermeneutics*.[96]

Turning to Soviet postmodernism and its subsequent narratives, I traced the development of this originally Western movement within an ideologically and culturally opposing paradigm. I referenced several theoretical definitions from works

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[86] Brian Kim Stefans, "Electronic Literature", in: *American Literature in Transition, 2000-20I0*, Edited by Rachel Greenwald Smith, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 193-210.

[87] Scott Bradfield, *Dreaming Revolution, Transgression in the Development of American Romance*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993.

[88] Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship,* Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

[89] Steven D. Scott, *The Gamefulness of American Postmodernism: John Barth & Louise Erdrich*, New York: Peter Lang, 2000.

[90] Laurie Vickroy, *Reading Trauma Narratives: The Contemporary Novel and the Psychology of Oppression*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015.

[91] David Kaufmann, "Yuppie Postmodernism", in: *Critical Essays on American Postmodernism,* Edited by Stanley Trachtenberg, New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1995, pp. 113-132.

[92] Ana Sobral, *Opting Out: Deviance and Generational Identities in American Post-War Cult Fiction,* New York: Brill, 2012.

[93] Paul Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists, Barthelme, Coover, Pynchon,* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991.

[94] Philip Stevick, "Scheherazade Runs out of Plots, Goes on Talking; the King, Puzzled, Listens: an Essay on New Fiction", in: *Critical Essays on American Postmodernism,* Edited by Stanley Trachtenberg, New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1995, pp. 45-68.

[95] Justine Pickard et al, *Alternatives to the Singularity, A Collaborative Presentation for/by Grumpy Futurists*, Monoskop, 2011 (online publication).
Source: https://monoskop.org/images/0/03/Alternatives_to_the_Singularity_2011.pdf

[96] Florian Cramer, *Crapularity Hermeneutics,* Rotterdam: Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, 2016.

like *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos,*[97] *Russian Literature since 1991,*[98] *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,*[99] and *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama.*[100]

I acknowledged Lipovetsky's insights into Thaw and dissident voices[101] and Alexander Genis' theory,[102] which attributes Soviet postmodernism to a specific formula (*postmodernism = avant-garde + pop culture, Russian postmodernism = avant-garde + sots-realism*). I gained a crucial perspective on postmodern Russian fiction as *a dialogue with chaos*[103] from Mark Lipovetsky and identified various post-postmodern developments, presented in *A Catalogue of New Poetries* by Mikhail Epstein.[104] Other noteworthy Epstein's concepts relevant to my research include *minimal religion*[105] and the notion of *acceleration*[106] as a significant political and philosophical category. I also explored Ilya Kalinin's concept of *Petropoetics*,[107] vital for contextualizing contemporary oil texts, and Ilya Kabakov's fascination with trash[108] as a postmodernist legacy within hypertrashrealism's definition.

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[97] Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos,* Edited by Eliot Borenstein, New York: Routledge, 2015 (first published in 1999 by M. E. Sharp).

[98] Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Literature since 1991*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2015.

[99] Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999.

[100] Brigit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama,* Bristol: Intellect, 2009.

[101] Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos,* Edited by Eliot Borenstein, New York: Routledge, 2015 (first published in 1999 by M. E. Sharp), p. 3.

[102] Alexander Genis, "Postmodernism and Sots-Realism, From Andrei Sinyavsky to Vladimir Sorokin", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, pp. 197-211.

[103] Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos,* Edited by Eliot Borenstein, New York: Routledge, 2015 (first published in 1999 by M. E. Sharp).

[104] Mikhail N. Epstein, "A Catalogue of New Poetries"*,* in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, pp. 145-151.

[105] Mikhail Epstein, "Minimal Religion", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, pp. 163-171.

[106] Mikhail Epstein, "The Paradox of Acceleration", Mikhail Epstein, in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, pp. 177-182.

[107] Ilya Kalinin, "Petropoetics", Translated by Jesse M. Savage, in: *Russian Literature since 1991*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 120-144.

[108] Илья Кабаков / Борис Гройс Р., *Диалоги*, Вологда: Герман Титов, 2010. & Илья Кабаков, В НАШЕМ ЖЭКе, Вологда: Герман Титов, 2011.

Additionally, I highlighted Serguei Oushakine's take on post-Soviet condition[109] expressed through the linguistic deficit of new generations, which is in accord with Brigit Beumer's and Mark Lipovetsky's thoughts on the prevalence of *performative texts*, *mat language,* and *communal violence.*[110] These are distinctive features of post-1990s Russian culture, as explored in Lipovetsky's analysis of the *trickster archetype*[111] in contemporary Russian novels, including those by Pelevin.

Crucially, I observed Lipovetsky's conclusion that American and Russian postmodernism, despite developing in opposite directions, moved closer together by the end of the Cold War,[112] aligning it with my goal of renewing interest in their comparative examination. I observed the recent research of Nina Kolesnikoff, who points out to the *instability of the term postmodernism* and explores it rather through the broader aspect of Russian Postmodernist Metafiction.[113] Notably, the work of Clemens Günther aligns with that of the US researcher, Linda Hutcheon, in analyzing contemporary Russian literature as a form of *metahistoriographic revolution.*[114] In examining trauma narratives, I have explored Alexander Etkind's analysis of the *undead*[115] motif, which is expressed through zombie, monster, and vampire characters as figures of trauma, further elaborated within his concept of *magical historicism*[116] as a response to the trauma of the post-Soviet period. The focus on the trauma narratives is also supported by Helena Goscilo, who considers trauma's role in subjectivization.[117] Supported by Ellen Rutten's *Sincerity after Communism*[118] and its comparison to David

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[109] Oushakine, Serguei, "In the State of Post-Soviet Aphasia, Symbolic Development in Contemporary Russia", in: *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 6, Abingdon: Carfax Publishing, 2000, pp. 991-1016.

[110] Brigit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama,* Bristol: Intellect, 2009.

[111] Mark Lipovetsky, *of the Cynical Reason: Tricksters in Soviet and Post-Soviet Culture*, Brighton, Massachusetts: Academic Studies Press, 2011.

[112] Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos,* Edited by Eliot Borenstein, New York: Routledge, 2015 (first published in 1999 by M. E. Sharp).

[113] Nina Kolesnikoff, *Russian Postmodernist Metafiction*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2011.

[114] Clemens Günther, *Die metahistoriographische Revolution. Problematisierungen historischer Erkenntnis in der russischen Gegenwartsliteratur*, Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2021.

[115] Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning. Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.

[116] Alexander Etkind, "Magical Historicism", in: *Russian Literature since 1991*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 104-119.

[117] Helena Goscilo, "Narrating Trauma", in: *Russian Literature since 1991*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 167-187.

[118] Ellen Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism, A Cultural History,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.

Foster Wallace's observations,[119] I examined the transnational phenomenon of New Sincerity as *a therapeutic tool for cultural trauma and an economic coping strategy*, presenting it as one of the elements of *hypertrashrealism*.

In the introduction to the idea of hypertrashrealism, the study draws from Baudrilard's hyperreality,[120] Harvey's insights on the plasticity of human condition[121] and Epstein's *The Dialectics of Hyper*,[122] supported by Olster's analysis of *The Trash Phenomenon*[123] and Kabakov's thematic work,[124] highlighting how hyperreal elements within the novels equally adopt, challenge and extend postmodernist themes.

In the exploration of trash and its multifaceted implications, several key theorists contribute to the discourse. Joseph Mozur's concept of *dermokratiia (crapocracy)*[125] articulates the decline observed in post-Soviet contexts, aligning with Justin Pickard's *Crapularity*,[126] which examines socio-economic implications of cultural subversion. Joshua Ozias Reno[127] redefines trash by highlighting its environmental and cross-species impacts. Boris Groys, in *On the New,*[128] discusses the avant-garde's use of trash in challenging artistic norms, a theme further developed by Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke in *Culture and Waste: The Creation and Destruction of Value*,[129] portraying waste as a cultural and value-shaping agent.

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[119] David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1997.

[120] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.

[121] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, *An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change,* Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1990.

[122] Mikhail Epstein, "The Dialectics of Hyper, From Modernism to Postmodernism", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, pp. 3-30.

[123] Stacey Olster, *The Trash Phenomenon*: *Contemporary Literature, Popular Culture, and the Making of the American Century*, Athens, the USA: University of Georgia Press, 2003.

[124] Илья Кабаков, *В НАШЕМ ЖЭКе*, Вологда: Герман Титов, 2011.

[125] Joseph Mozur, "Viktor Pelevin: Post-Sovism, Buddhism, & Pulp Fiction"*,* in: *World Literature Today*, Vol. 76, No. 2, Norman: Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, 2002, p. 63.

[126] Justine Pickard et al, *Alternatives to the Singularity, A Collaborative Presentation for/by Grumpy Futurists*, Monoskop, 2011 (online publication).
Source: https://monoskop.org/images/0/03/Alternatives_to_the_Singularity_2011.pdf

127 Joshua Ozias Reno, "Toward a New Theory of Waste: From 'Matter out of Place' to Signs of Life", in: *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 31, No. 6, London: Sage Publications, 2014, pp. 3–27.

[128] Boris Groys, *On the New,* London: Verso Books, 2014.

[129] Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, "Introduction: Cultural Economies of Waste", in: *Culture and Waste, The Creation and Destruction of Value,* Edited by Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, pp. ix-xviii.

Furthermore, Gay Hawkins, in *Plastic Bags: Living with Rubbish*,[130] explores the moral and ethical aspects of the relationship between humans and waste. Jennifer Patico's analysis[131] of the middle class post-Soviet changes complements these perspectives. Florian Cramer, through *Crapularity Aesthetics*[132] and *Crapularity Hermeneutics*,[133] delves into the socio-economic and interpretive challenges of contemporary culture, including the rise of neo-fascism. Patricia Yaeger, in *Trash as Archive, Trash as Enlightenment*,[134] and Aleida Assmann's *Texts, Traces, Trash: The Changing Media of Cultural Memory*[135] explore trash as a symbol of resistance and a medium for cultural memory.

3. **Comparative Analysis of Chuck Palahniuk and Viktor Pelevin:**
   This involves:

   a) Juxtaposing Palahniuk's *Survivor*[136] with Pelevin's *Omon Ra*.[137]

   b) In-depth exploration of two seminal novels – Palahniuk's *Fight Club*[138] and Pelevin's *Generation P*.[139]

   c) Contrasting Palahniuk's *Beautiful You*[140] with Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.*.[141]

In addition to providing a contextual framework for the narratives of Palahniuk and Pelevin, I have undertaken a focused analysis of particular elements that are

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[130] Gay Hawkins, "Plastic Bags: Living with Rubbish", in: *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, London: Sage Publications, 2001, pp. 5-23.

[131] Jennifer Patico, *Consumption and Social Change in a Post-Soviet Middle Class,* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.

[132] Florian Cramer, "Crapularity Aesthetics", in *Making & Breaking*, Issue 1, Online Journal of Avans University of Applied Sciences' Centre of Applied Research for Art, Design and Technology, Breda: makingandbreaking.org/article/crapularity-aesthetics/, 2018.

[133] Florian Cramer, *Crapularity Hermeneutics,* Rotterdam: Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, 2016.

[134] Patricia Yaeger, "Trash as Archive, Trash as Enlightenment", in: *Culture and Waste, The Creation and Destruction of Value,* Edited by Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, pp. 103-116.

[135] Aleida Assmann, "Texts, Traces, Trash: The Changing Media of Cultural Memory", in: *Representations*, No. 56, Special Issue: The New Erudition, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, pp. 123-134.

[136] Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor,* London: Vintage, 2000 (first published in 1999).

[137] Victor Pelevin, *Omon Ra*, London: Faber and Faber, 1996.

[138] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996).

[139] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000.

[140] Chuck Palahniuk, *Beautiful* You, New York: Doubleday, 2014.

[141] Виктор Пелевин, *S.N.U.F.F.,* Москва: Эскмо, 2012.

strikingly similar in their respective works. The examination of Eric Repphun's *reclamation of agency and authenticity*[142] within a culture driven by commodification, as discerned in Palahniuk's novel, parallels Joseph Mozur's observations[143] concerning the perceived impotence of humanity in the face of rampant consumerism, a central theme in Pelevin's narratives. Mozur's identification of *crapocracy* resonates with the previously mentioned *crapularity* theory by Julian Pickard and with the self-loathing experienced by Palahniuk's characters who view themselves as literal *crap*, thereby enabling a deeper examination of motifs related to the concept of trash and what I define as the environment of *non-choices*. The concepts introduced by Julia Kristeva regarding the *abjection of the human body*[144] and Giorgio Agamben's idea of *bare life*[145] are here particularly relevant. These concepts suggest that the state treats its citizens as expendable, similar to trash, depriving them of their human dignity and their role in the political domain.

In a similar vein, I have considered research in vulnerability studies. Martha Albertson Fineman[146] presents vulnerability as a universal human characteristic, essential to the foundation of social policy, while Judith Butler[147] provides insights into how social norms influence body vulnerability, particularly in the context of transgressing gender norms. Additionally, I have incorporated Lynne Segal's[148] observations on the subject of masculinity.

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[142] Eric Repphun, "Every Story is a Ghost: Chuck Palahniuk and the Reenchantment of Suffering", in: *Religion and the Body, Modern Science and the Construction of Religious Meaning*, Edited by David Cave and Rebecca Sachs Norris, Leiden: Brill, pp. 129-154.

[143] Joseph Mozur, "Viktor Pelevin: Post-Sovism, Buddhism, & Pulp Fiction", in: *World Literature Today*, Vol. 76, No. 2, Norman: Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, 2002, pp. 58-67.

[144] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

[145] Giorgo Agamben, *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

[146] Martha Albertson Fineman, *The Autonomy Myth, A Theory of Dependency*, New York: The New Press, 2005.

[147] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London: Verso, 2004.

[148] Lynne Segal, "Changing Men: Masculinities in Context", in: *Theory and Society*, Vol. 22, No. 5, Dordrecht: Springer, 1993, pp. 625-641.

Furthermore, the detection of Marxist undertones in Palahniuk's work by Jeffrey A. Sartain[149] aligns with Sally Dalton-Brown's analysis[150] of Pelevin as a satirical commentator on post-Soviet capitalism. Both scholars emphasize the debilitating impact of capitalist hegemony and the seductive allure of the capitalist paradigm. Dalton-Brown's exploration of fragmentation, reflecting the challenges and uncertainties of a society in transition, parallels Laurie Vickroy's findings[151] in the analysis of Palahniuk's narratives, where self-mutilation emerges as a response to traumatic experiences, ultimately turning violence inward. These resonances reinforce my exploration of transgressive escapism and the search for alternative forms of masculinity.

Additionally, Ana Sobral's take on individualism and feminist tropes,[152] where protagonists seek refuge from destructive paths through collaboration between men and women against consumerism and neoliberalism, finds resonance in Keith Livers' analysis[153] of Pelevin challenging traditional binaries through themes of transhumanity and collaboration between humans and machines. These comparisons enhance the examination of the romantic aspects present in these authors' works, as well as the exploration of identity politics concerning heroes and antiheroes equally.

Most significantly, the contextualization of similarities between these two authors and their contemporaries, as noted by Boris Noordenbos,[154] Mark Lipovetsky and Vera Shamina & Tatyana Prokhorova,[155] strengthens the rationale for their comparative study. The noteworthy aspects highlighted by these scholars encompass

[149] Jeffrey A. Sartain, *Sacred and Immoral: On the Writings of Chuck Palahniuk*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.

[150] Sally Dalton-Brown, "Ludic Nonchalance or Ludicrous Despair? Viktor Pelevin and Russian Postmodernist Prose", in: *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 75, No. 2, London: University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 1997, pp. 216-233.

[151] Laurie Vickroy, *Reading Trauma Narratives: The Contemporary Novel and the Psychology of Oppression*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015.

[152] Ana Sobral, *Opting Out: Deviance and Generational Identities in American Post-War Cult Fiction,* New York: Brill, 2012.

[153] Keith Livers, "Is There Humanity in Posthumanity? Viktor Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.*", in: *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 3, Los Angeles: American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European, 2018, pp. 503-522.

[154] Boris Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature and the Search for a Russian Identity*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

[155] Vera Shamina and Tatyana Prokhorova, "Russian Kinsmen of Chuck Palahniuk", in: *World Literature Today,* Vol. 88, No. 6, Norman: Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, 2014 (web exclusive: no page reference).

shared postmodernist mythologies, prompting the deconstruction of prevailing cultural narratives in both authors' works, the diagnosis of their generation's challenges, indicating a collective awareness of the issues affecting global societies in the post-Cold War era, and a sense of hope for recovery. This last element particularly, in my view, distinguishes them from traditional postmodernism, as the prevailing despair within the hypertrashreal landscape allows for the possibility of successful survival through acceptance and transformation.

4. **Comparative Literary Theory Application:**

This thesis expands upon Ihab Hassan's treatise on postmodernism[156] by applying his comparative literary theory to the concept of hypertrashrealism. Hypertrashrealism is thus presented as an evolutionary literary movement, supplanting the term post-postmodernism, offering new lenses for understanding the works of Chuck Palahniuk and Viktor Pelevin, but also the new developments in literature in 21st century.

It delves into presenting the specific detected elements of hypertrashrealism within the comparative frame, namely: Crapularity/Nihilism, Recycled Form (fragmenting, modular), Gamification, Algorithm, Transgression, Acceleration/Repetition, Simulacrum, Disruption, Recreation/Reconstruction, Metathesis, Oversaturation, Patchwork, Parody/Wordplay, Computational Linguistics/NLP, Modality (Human–Computer Interaction), Word Processing, Synecdoche, Repetition and Recombination, Mutation/Cyberspace, Open-Ended Apperception / Rereading, Floating Signifier, Screenable (Spectatorly), Hyper-narrative/Pseudo-Histoire, Code-switching, Truth/Cure, Glitch, Technosexual/Cyborg, Dissociative Identity Disorder, Reconstructivism/New Meaning, Minimal Religion, New Sincerity, Anticipation, and Transimmanence.

These elements are exemplified through excerpts from a range of novels by Palahniuk and Pelevin. More precisely, from Palahniuk's *Adjustment Day,*[157] *Beautiful*

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[156] Ihab Hassan, "Postface 1982: Toward a Concept of Postmodernism", in: *Critical Essays on American Postmodernism,* Edited by Stanley Trachtenberg, New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1995, pp. 81-92.
[157] Chuck Palahniuk, *Adjustment Day*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2018.

You,[158] *Choke*,[159] *Damned*,[160] *Diary*,[161] *Fight Club*,[162] *Invisible Monsters*,[163] *Lullaby*,[164] *Pygmy*,[165] *Rant*,[166] *Snuff*,[167] and *Survivor*.[168] Similarly, Pelevin's contributions include *Babylon*,[169] *Batman Apollo*,[170] *Numbers*,[171] *DPP (nn)*,[172] *Empire V*,[173] *iPhuck 10*,[174] *Omon Ra*,[175] *S.N.U.F.F.*,[176] *The Secret Views of Mount Fuji*,[177] *The Clay Machine Gun*,[178] *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*,[179] *Transhumanism Inc.*,[180] and *The Helmet of Horror*.[181]

In addition to the examples drawn from these novels, the analysis of elements incorporates supporting theories from diverse scientific disciplines.

Florian Cramer's *Crapularity Hermeneutics*[182] based on group work *Alternatives to the Singularity*[183] provides a critical backdrop for engaging with the novels' treatment of cultural excess and informational overload. Brian Kim Stefans is

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[158] Chuck Palahniuk, *Beautiful* You, New York: Doubleday, 2014.

[159] Chuck Palahniuk, *Choke,* London: Vintage, 2003.

[160] Chuck Palahniuk, *Damned,* New York: Anchor Books, 2011.

[161] Chuck Palahniuk, *Diary,* New York: Anchor Books, 2004, epub.

[162] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996).

[163] Chuck Palahniuk, *Invisible Monster*s, London: Vintage, 2003.

[164] Chuck Palahniuk, *Lullaby,* New York: Anchor Books, 2003.

[165] Chuck Palahniuk, *Pigmy,* London: Jonathan Cape, 2009.

[166] Chuck Palahniuk, *Rant: an Oral Biography of Buster Casey*, New York: Doubleday, 2007.

[167] Chuck Palahniuk, *Snuff,* New York: Anchor Books, 2009 (first published in 2008).

[168] Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor,* London: Vintage, 2000 (first published in 1999).

[169] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon***,** translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000.

[170] Виктор Олегович Пелевин, *Batman Apollo*, Москва: Эксмо, 2013.

[171] В. О, Пелевин, *Числа,* Москва: Эксмо, 2006.

[172] В. О, Пелевин, *ДПП (нн) Диалектика Переходного Периода из Ниоткуда в Никуда*, Москва: Эксмо, 2007.

[173] Виктор Пелевин, *Empire V, Ампир В,* Москва: Эксмо, 2006.

[174] Виктор Пелевин, *iPhuck 10,* Москва: Э, 2017.

[175] Victor Pelevin, *Omon Ra*, London: Faber and Faber, 1996.

[176] Виктор Пелевин, *S.N.U.F.F.,* Москва: Эскмо, 2012.

[177] Виктор Пелевин, *Тайные виды на гору Фудзи,* Москва: Эксмо, 2018.

[178] Victor Pelevin, *The Clay Machine Gun*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 1999.

[179] Victor Pelevin, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2008.

[180] Виктор Пелевин, *Transhumanism Inc*., Москва: Эксмо, 2021.

[181] Виктор Пелевин, *Шлем ужаса: Креатифф о Тесее и Минотавре,* Москва: Открытый Мир, 2005.

[182] Florian Cramer, *Crapularity Hermeneutics,* Rotterdam: Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, 2016.

[183] Justine Pickard et al, *Alternatives to the Singularity, A Collaborative Presentation for/by Grumpy Futurists*, Monoskop, 2011 (online publication).
Source: https://monoskop.org/images/0/03/Alternatives_to_the_Singularity_2011.pdf

mentioned due to his focus on hypertext,[184] and similarly, Humberto Beck for making connections between the contemporary digital algorithm with myth.[185] Roman Jakobson's seminal work on structural linguistics[186] offered a framework for examining Dave Ciccoricco's contemporary theory of *repetition and recombination*,[187] referring to the dynamic processes within network texts.

Mark Lipovetsky's interpretation of Deleuze's rhizomatic model,[188] Susan Sontag's theory of hermeneutics[189] and Donna J. Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*[190] were used as the pretext for diving into the contemporary convergences and divergences from these concepts, within the respectively examined elements. Within an element examining psychological implications in the texts, I acknowledged Laurie Vickroy's[191] and Alexander Etkind's[192] theories on trauma narratives.

And, most directly, I revisited theories of *minimal religion*[193] and *New Sincerity*[194] as defined by Mikhail Epstein and Ellen Rutten, explored Anné Hendrik Verhoef's ideas on *transimmanence*[195] and Robert Rosen's concept of *anticipatory*

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[184] Brian Kim Stefans, "Electronic Literature", in: *American Literature in Transition, 2000-20I0*, Edited by Rachel Greenwald Smith, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 193-210.

[185] Humberto Beck, "Twenty-First-Century Political Theory: A Balance", in: *Political Theory, An International Journal of Political Philosophy,* Vol. 51, No. 1, SAGE journals, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing, 2023, pp. 18–26.

[186] Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances", in: *Roman Jakobson, Selected Writing, Volume II Word and Language,* The Hague: De Gruyter Mouton, 1971, pp. 239-259.

[187] Dave Ciccoricco, *Repetition and Recombination: Reading Network Fiction*, Christchurch, New Zealand: University of Canterbury, 2005.

[188] Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos,* Edited by Eliot Borenstein, New York: Routledge, 2015 (first published in 1999 by M. E. Sharp).

[189] Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation"*,* in: *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966, pp. 1-10.

[190] Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century"*,* in: *Manifestly Haraway*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, pp. 3-90.

[191] Laurie Vickroy, *Reading Trauma Narratives: The Contemporary Novel and the Psychology of Oppression,* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015, p. 157.

[192] Alexander Etkind, "Magical Historicism", in: *Russian Literature since 1991*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 104-119.

[193] Mikhail Epstein, "Minimal Religion", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, pp. 163-171.

[194] Ellen Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism, A Cultural History,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.

[195] Anné Hendrik Verhoef, "Transimmanence and the Im/possible Relationship between Eschatology and Transcendence", in: *Religions*, Vol. 7, No. 11, Basel: MDPI, 2016, pp. 135: 1-15.

systems[196] making these four elements directly one of the prominent hypertrashrealist features.

By interweaving these theoretical perspectives, the comparative analysis aims to elucidate the intricate dynamics of hypertrashrealism as reflected in the literary innovations of Palahniuk and Pelevin. This multifaceted theoretical framework aids in navigating the complex interrelations between politics, economy, culture, and the evolving philosophical discourse on the nature of reality and representation in the post-Cold-War era.

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[196] Robert Rosen, *Anticipatory Systems: Philosophical, Mathematical, and Methodological Foundations,* New York: Springer, 2012.

"Acquiring a niche in the competitive market-place of Cold War culture required a substantial investment."[197]

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[197] Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, London: Granta Books, 1999, p. 105

Part I: Scenography of (Post-)Postmodernism

Political Backdrop

The Trinity atomic bomb test in New Mexico, which preceded the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as presented in David Lynch's Twin Peaks: The Return, Episode 8 (2017).[198]

One might argue that a new era dawned with the detonation of nuclear bombs on August 6 and August 9, 1945. These events marked the catastrophic culmination of the Second World War (and, in a broader context, both World Wars), producing the indelible image of mushroom clouds that continue to haunt cultural and artistic expression, as evidenced in this still from one of David Lynch's more recent works. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki ushered in a slow awakening of the posttraumatic reverberations throughout our altered reality. In the aftermath of World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as superpowers on opposing sides of a new global divide, setting the stage for a long-lasting ideological confrontation. In this context and as the ultimate expression of transgression,

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[198] Source: https://quod.lib.umich.edu/f/fc/13761232.0041.324/--atomic-gambit-of-twin-peaks-the-return?rgn=main;view=fulltext

disruption, and fragmentation, the nuclear attacks politically gave rise to key Cold War strategies, notably brinkmanship (for the origins of brinkmanship, refer to Martin McCauley, 2017, p. 46), and battles waged through soft power. The apocalyptic imagery invoked by the atomic bombings not only reshaped our collective psyche but also catalyzed the strategic dynamics of the ensuing geopolitical landscape, as Walter Lippmann's critique of the emerging Cold War dynamics illustrates.

> "Opponents of this programme to transform American rivalry with the Soviet Union into a global political, cultural and psychological battle labelled it the 'Cold War' – the term that the neoliberal critic Walter Lippmann had borrowed from George Orwell's essay warning of the oligarchic and technocratic state that would emerge from a condition of permanent war."[199]

Both the USA and the Soviet Union clung to their perceived moral high ground as victors against Nazi Germany in World War II. Nonetheless, the economic, technological, and military dominance of the USA reinforced its position and facilitated the expansion of its empire and the magnetism of the American Dream. The perilously dangerous brinkmanship that followed the atomic era reached its apex during the Cuban Missile Crisis, just a year after the construction of the Berlin Wall. This confrontation highlighted the catastrophic potential of a full-scale nuclear war, which would result in mutual annihilation. Such a harrowing episode made it clear that the primary Cold War actors would need to adopt geopolitical tactics on non-military fronts, including in the economic, cultural, and, inevitably, religious domains.

> "World War II remade the United States' role in the world and with it the relation of religion to American public life and thought. […] America emerged from the war the most powerful nation on earth, in sole possession of the most destructive weapon ever known, confident of its ability to project its might worldwide, and dedicated to interventionist policies in pursuit of such lofty and idealistic goals as world freedom and world peace. Domestically, the change after the war was even more dramatic. In 1945 there was a shortage of labor, of

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[199] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, London: Verso, 2011, p. 122.

housing, of meats and durable goods, of school and church buildings. But there was no shortage of hope for the economy, and the Gross National Product quadrupled over its prewar level in the next five years. […] Both of these two grand changes in the American nation and its relation to the world exerted tremendous influence on the dynamic relationship between church and state."[200]

The Cold War chiefly perpetuated a somewhat reductive perspective of dichotomies and polarizations. The world, still under the sway of an imperialist and colonial mindset, was split into stark contrasts: the West vs. the East, symbolized by the division of Berlin; the USA vs. the Soviet Union; capitalism vs. communism; pop culture vs. avant-garde; Christianity vs. atheism; the CIA vs. the KGB; oil vs. coal industries; the individual vs. the collective; democracy vs. totalitarianism. Shortly after World War II, the prevailing narrative demanded a clear stance within these ostensibly clear-cut divisions of a far more intricate global landscape. Political and cultural identities were increasingly forged not by what one aspired to embody, but by what one sought to oppose. This left scant space for nuance, with identities often centered around a dualistic and antagonistic confrontation between the self and the other; that is, respectively, between the capitalist and the communist other.

> "The emergence of the Cold War was a slow process. It is normally dated from 1947, but all that says is that it was then out in the open. Even after the opening of the Soviet archives after 1991, it is still impossible to conclude who was more responsible: Stalin or Truman. One can plot Stalin's actions quite closely, and something he recognised as potentially fatal for the Soviet system was close association with capitalist powers."[201]

The Cold War's conclusion and the dissolution of the Soviet Union followed five years after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, a catastrophe borne of neglect and

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[200] James D. Beumler, "America Emerges as a World Power: Religion, Politics, and Nationhood, 1940-1960", in: *Church and State in America: A Bibliographic Guide, Volume 2: The Civil War to the Present Day*, Edited by John F. Wilson, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1987, p. 225.
[201] Martin McCauley, *The Cold War 1949-2016*, London: Routledge, 2017, p. 288.

malpractice. All these nuclear-related incidents seem to encapsulate the entirety of the Cold War and set the stage for the geopolitical legacy of the contemporary world that is, despite advancements, still grappling with the persistent dread of escalation towards the totality of destruction.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the U.S. solidified its identity through military and monetary dominance, prompting global powers to adopt its market liberalization strategies. Despite the stark opposition between capitalist America and communist Soviet Union, the post-Cold War era saw the advent of neoliberal capitalism in traditionally communist countries like Russia and China, highlighting the stark gap between their foundational ideologies and the new economic models and cultural paradigms they adopted.

> "The US has never been so isolated from the rest of the world politically, culturally, and even militarily as now. And this isolation is not, as it was in the past, the product of a US withdrawal from world affairs but a consequence of its excessive and unilateralist interventionism. It also comes at a time when the US economy is more interwoven into global production and financial networks than ever before."[202]

Postmodernism, which unfolded coterminously with the Cold War, witnessed the disintegration of reality and, consequently, the disintegration of text, manifesting through works that featured entropic fantasies (exemplified by J. G. Ballard's *The 4-Dimensional Nightmare*[203] and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*[204]). The post-war literary laughter served as a defense mechanism against the haunting aftermath of the Holocaust and atomic bombings – a world bifurcated not just by the Berlin Wall but also by the pre- and post-horror eras. This laughter, often hysterical, cynical, or nihilistic, resembled the involuntary outbursts one might experience at a funeral – a survival tactic in the face of overwhelming distress.

As a quintessentially Cold-War literary language, postmodernism had to morph its shape with the official end of the era and transform into something that depicts the

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[202] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 196.
[203] J. G. Ballard, *The 4-Dimensional Nightmare*, London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1963.
[204] Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow,* London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1973).

new global superpowers born and shaped at the beginning of the 21ˢᵗ century, as well as new global technological, ecological, and cultural circumstances. It is within this context that authors such as Chuck Palahniuk and Viktor Pelevin emerged, their novels bearing the marks of transition from Cold War narratives to those reflecting the existential and literary themes of the new millennium more accurately.

What these post-Cold War writers inherited was the totality of an artificially induced Cold War reality: the uncontrollable free market, the globalization and fragmentation of culture, the acceleration of information, and corporate dominance supplanting state control. Chuck Palahniuk positioned himself as a writer embracing and advancing the new *anti-narrative*, which became painfully necessary after the end of the Cold War and in the era of the post-9/11 *war on terror*. Meanwhile, Viktor Pelevin observed the post-Soviet reality, characterized by the enduring rise of oligarchy and the entrenchment of Vladimir Putin's autocratic regime.

It is crucial to comprehend the political and economic circumstances that have sculpted today's narratives in order to understand both the origins and the trajectory of contemporary literary texts. The neoliberal dystopia, forged by geopolitical contests for dominance and resources, alongside the advent of new media and climate change, has profoundly influenced the language and literary tropes that signify the transition from postmodernism to what is herein termed *hypertrashrealism*. To grasp the essence of *hypertrashrealism*, one must first recognize the pivotal elements of this challenging landscape, as these underpin the socio-economic and political fabric from which this literary movement arises. Key elements from 20ᵗʰ-century politics that persist into the 21ˢᵗ century and continue to shape cultural and literary expressions include:

- Oil and other fossil fuels
- The neoliberal Keynesian economic model
- The dichotomy of the Cold War and its enduring effects

Petroreality

"For thousands of years, human beings had screwed up and trashed and crapped on this planet, and now history expected me to clean up after everyone. I have to wash out and flatten my soup cans. And account for every drop of used motor oil. And I have to foot the bill for nuclear waste and buried gasoline tanks and landfilled toxic sludge dumped a generation before I was born."[205]

Leopold Museum guard apprehends Letzte Generation activists who splattered black liquid on and glued themselves to Klimt's "Death and Life" (1915). (photo courtesy Letzte Generation)[206]

Petroleum, while utilized for millennia, reached its zenith as the primary energy source in the 20th century. Its refinement into gasoline and fuel oil, along with the widespread adoption of the internal combustion engine after 1900, are inextricably linked to its production and usage.

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[205] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 124.
[206] Source: https://hyperallergic.com/780354/klimt-gets-splashed-with-oil-in-latest-climate-protest/

"In the Russian-controlled Caucasus, oil workers were already able to benefit from this development. The oilfields of Baku, in modern Azerbaijan, concentrated around the city and occupying an area of no more than 12 square miles, produced more than half the world's petroleum for a brief period at the start of the twentieth century."[207]

Since the mid-1950s, oil has become the world's most pivotal source of energy, demanding significantly fewer workers than coal production. Consequently, it emerged as a key point of contention in international power struggles, influencing military and trade conflicts, including both World Wars – the German invasion of the Soviet Union aimed to capture the Baku oilfields – as well as the Cold War and subsequent military interventions by the USA and contemporary Russia. Today, oil accounts for approximately 90% of the fuel requirements for vehicles. By the 1990s, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the USA each produced two to three times as much oil as any of the other top dozen producers, including Canada, Norway, the United Kingdom, China, Venezuela, Mexico, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran.[208]

In the 21st century, oil is a leading contributor to environmental degradation, with its production and use accounting for a quarter of total greenhouse gas emissions. This includes the impact of oil extraction, the ecological devastation of frequent oil spills, and its role as a primary ingredient in plastic manufacturing, which leads to significant environmental pollution. Governments and corporations – notorious for their lethargic response to the consequences of fossil fuel dependence and their historical use of the oil scarcity narrative to manipulate markets – continue to underplay the severity of these issues. This narrative has facilitated neoliberal economic strategies and the oligarchic monopoly over resources. In an age dominated by *petroreality*, disruption has shifted from a labor movement tool for securing workers' rights to a primary method of control.

"In both value and volume, petroleum had become the largest commodity in world trade. In 1945 the United States produced two-thirds of the world's oil,

[207] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, London: Verso, 2011, pp. 32, 33.
[208] ibid.

and more than half of the remaining third was produced in Latin America and the Caribbean. Under the arrangements that governed the international oil trade, the commodity was sold in the currency not of the country where it was produced, nor of the place where it was consumed, but of the international companies that controlled production. 'Sterling oil', as it was known (principally oil from Iran), was traded in British pounds, but the bulk of global sales were in 'dollar oil'. The rest of the world had to purchase the energy they required using American dollars. The value of the dollar as the basis of international finance depended on the flow of oil."[209]

In his work *Perilous Power, The Middle East and US Foreign Policy, Dialogues on Terror, Democracy, War and Justice*, Noam Chomsky engages in a dialogue with Gilbert Achcar, highlighting the significance of oil control as a potent disruptive force. Chomsky articulates that the United States' quest to control Middle Eastern oil is not motivated by a lack of resources but by the objective to sustain its supremacy as the foremost global power, particularly in relation to Europe, which is viewed as a potential competitor.[210]

Producing scarcity[211] of oil, as a means to underpin control over the global oil market, is an approach that, in a somewhat ironic twist, goes hand in hand with *the production of an excess of waste*, notably plastic. This very acceleration of geopolitical strategies and production has propelled us into a state where, in the post-Cold War era, there has been a hastening towards a hypertrash reality. It is from such a milieu that *oil texts* arise, as described by Kalinin in 2015, offering a critical lens on the complexities of environmental and political entwinements.

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[209] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, London: Verso, 2011, p. 111.

[210] Noam Chomsky and Gilbert Achcar, *Perilous Power: The Middle East and US Foreign Policy, Dialogues on Terror, Democracy, War and Justice,* London: Penguin Books, 2007.

[211] "'The world 'energy crisis' or 'energy shortage' is a fiction', argued the oil economist Morris Adelman. 'But belief in the fiction is a fact. It makes people accept higher oil prices as imposed by nature, when they are really fixed by collusion.' He presented evidence that there was a surplus of world oil supply, that demand was rising less quickly than it had been in the 1960s, and that the State Department and the oil companies were indeed colluding with the producer states to benefit jointly from a large increase in the oil price.", Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, London: Verso, 2011, p. 181.

A still from David Cronenberg's 2022 movie Crimes of the Future, portrays a boy who evolved into a plastic-eating human, only to be murdered as a symbol of undesirable change [212]

Neoliberal Dystopia

"If oil played a key role in the making of 'the economy', it also shaped the project that would challenge it, and later provide a rival method of governing democratic politics: the 'market' of neoliberalism."[213]

In the documentary *Bitter Lake*,[214] Adam Curtis, an English filmmaker, employs his unique poetic approach, utilizing BBC archive footage, skillfully edited and accompanied by a thoughtfully selected soundtrack and cinematic elements. The film delves into the complex crises in Middle Eastern countries and examines the extensive involvement of the USA and the UK, as well as the significant, though slightly lesser, role of the Soviet Union/Russia, in their direct formation. The title of the film is a direct reference to the 1945 meeting between Franklin D. Roosevelt, then President of the USA, and King Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia, aboard a ship on the Great

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[212] Source: https://www.thebulwark.com/crimes-of-the-future-review/
[213] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, London: Verso, 2011, p. 141.
[214] Adam Curtis, *Bitter Lake*, BBC iPlayer, 2015.

Bitter Lake in the Suez Canal. This location becomes a potent metaphor for the far-reaching consequences of their agreement. The meeting, intended to prevent economic disasters like those seen during the Great Depression and the post-WWII period, aimed to ensure a steady oil supply from the Middle East for the reconstruction of Europe via the Marshall Plan and to bolster the economic growth and stability of the USA. During this meeting, the USA agreed not to interfere with the radical Islamist movements in Saudi Arabia in return for a reliable oil supply.

Curtis illustrates how these interactions eventually precipitated the 1973 Oil Shock and the inception of neoliberal globalization, characterized by the rise of Western financial institutions and the establishment of conservative power structures within Saudi Arabia.[215] This newfound wealth began to flow into Middle Eastern countries, only to complete a full circle back to Western banks, ironically strengthening their control over capital flows despite their origins in precipitating the economic crisis (an event Roosevelt was keen to avoid). The purported *scarcity of oil* showcased during the 1973 Oil Shock invigorated corporate institutions as new power centers and bolstered the emergence of neoliberal globalization through their growing financial dominance.

> "The postwar petroleum order and the prosperity it brought seemed to collapse too easily. The events known as the 1973-74 oil crisis brought an era of generally improving conditions of life in many parts of the world to a sudden and prolonged halt. The crisis confirmed the collapse of the post-Second World War system for managing international finance and a transfer in the management of oil pricing to the producer countries, which began to obtain a greatly increased income from its production. In industrialised countries, the powers of labour that had secured more egalitarian and democratic social orders were weakened, and were to be confronted by a new instrument of control: the neoliberal laws of the market. In the global south, governments with oil revenues built militarised states while those without built debts, as Western

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[215] ibid., Note: a relevant excerpt of the documentary can be watched here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyPp27FfgQc&t=614s

banks awash with petrodollars recycled them into risky loans to financially weakened governments."[216]

This looming threat of another economic collapse propelled conservative leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan to the forefront as champions of the Keynesian economic model, which has continued to shape the global economy and reality to the present day. Within the existing Cold War narrative of anti-communism, the liberalization of the market aligned seamlessly with geopolitical strategies. The concept of the *free market* was heralded as a symbol of newfound freedoms, and the collapse of the Soviet Union served to enhance its triumphant appeal.

> "The Soviet Union and its satellites were unable and China unwilling to extend substantive loans to communist Third World states. This led many of them to begin moving back to the market economy before 1985. Washington had now found a model which was more successful than military intervention in undermining communist states: money."[217]

The economic model championed by leaders like Thatcher and Reagan, while advocating for freedom, largely benefited only a privileged few due to tax cuts, privatizations, and the erosion of centralized state and economic planning. This market supremacy bolstered the myth of the *capable individual* but deepened social inequalities and eroded labor and human rights. It's critical to recognize, though, that such a profound class divide wasn't a 20th-century innovation. The Belle Époque, closely linked with imperialism and colonialism, set the stage for the original wealth disparity and Europe's global domination. For instance, during this era's zenith, in 1910, amid a pervasive imperialistic milieu, 90% of France's wealth belonged to the top 10%, while in Britain, 1% held 70% of the nation's wealth.[218] The late 20th century, however, not only reshaped wealth distribution – with North America emerging as a central

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[216] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, London: Verso, 2011, p. 173.
[217] Martin McCauley, *The Cold War 1949-2016*, London: Routledge, 2017, pp. 198, 199.
[218] Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Translated by Arthur Goldhammer, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014.

player – but also saw a dramatic population increase and growing inequality within countries, marking a significant shift from the previous era's dynamics. Within the ostensibly promising neoliberal discourse, its proponents were fervently attempting to wrest control from the looming recession of the 1970s, unleashing an economic model that paradoxically championed the narrative of relinquishing control, allowing the market to *self-regulate*. This led to the uncontrollable exacerbation of the wealth gap and the slow disappearance of the middle class.

"If we look at the regional composition of the global top 10%, we find that the undisputed dominant position that Europe occupied between 1880 and 1910 has been shared with North America since the 1920s (see Figure 2.12). The share of top 10% income holders coming from East Asia, and South and Southeast Asia has increased gradually since 1950, with an acceleration since 1980, but the Western dominance of the global top 10% remains striking. We find the same general pattern for the regional composition of the global top 1%, with two interesting caveats. First, the dominant position of Europe largely collapsed after World War I (and never fully recovered), so that North America has been the undisputed leader of the global top 1% since around 1930. Next, it is worth noting that the global top 1% includes, in recent decades, a relatively large fraction of people from the Middle East, Latin America and Russia. In effect, these regions play a substantially bigger role in the global top 1% than in the global top 10%, reflecting the fact that their rates of within-country inequality are very high."[219]

The referenced report further indicates that billionaires and multinational corporations are the most powerful economic entities, with their wealth and influence growing even in the post-COVID world. To alter the distribution of wealth and the global economic system requires not only higher taxation of individuals but also of multinational corporations, a subject that is seldom addressed within the prevailing, one-sided discourse.

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[219] Lucas Chancel, Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, Gabriel Zucman et al, *World Inequality Report 2022*, Paris: World Inequality Lab wir2022.wid.world, 2021, p. 60.

"In spite of all the rhetoric about curing sick economies, neither Britain nor the US achieved high levels of economic performance in the 1980s, suggesting that neoliberalism was not the answer to the capitalists' prayers."[220]

Within such a landscape and in the aftermath of 9/11 attack, with the event of a significant historical weight at their side, George Bush and his administration launched the War on Terror (officially named Global War on Terrorism) against the *axis of evil* – originally Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. Labeled as the fight against terrorism, it led to a series of controversial military interventions, starting with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the rise of racism and Islamophobia in the national discourse. This interplay of economic and political reality contributed to the emergence of a contemporary US political phenomenon that Wolin defines as *inverted totalitarianism*[221] – the illusion of democracy in which corporate and political elites manipulate and control the political landscape, under the pretense of heralding security and stability, thus cementing the position of the USA as a fascist superpower.[222] Masha Gessen,[223] similarly, observes the return to totalitarianism in Russia in the aftermath of another historically significant event, the fall of Soviet Union, not through strict ideology but via a politics of nihilism, opportunism and fear that blossomed in the 1990s. Such politics demonstrated the vulnerability of democratic systems and led to the rise of Vladimir Putin's autocracy. These similar developments signify the break with the traditional autocracy of state governance both in the West and East, approaching a corporate autocracy that epitomizes the age of the individual, where the very concept of *self* and its surrounding landscape have been grotesquely commodified.

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[220] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 88.

[221] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism – New Edition*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017.

[222] Sheldon S Wolin, *A Kind of Fascism Is Replacing Our Democracy,* New York: Newsday, 18th July, 2003.

[223] Masha Gessen, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2017.

Mića Stajčić, American Dream, 2008, digital print on canvas, with the author's explanatory note:

„Microsoft Corporation, with its cunning policy of imposing software of questionable quality and its setting as a standard for the entire world, managed to realize the American Dream and become one of the strongest companies in the world. The famous meadow in the picture represents their choice of ideal ambience for a satisfied Windows XP operating system user. Also, it is the most viewed landscape ever.“[224]

The individualism championed by the neoliberal model, with its ostensible emphasis on personal freedom and self-determination, diverges sharply from older liberalist conceptions that balanced individual rights with civic responsibility and collective welfare. It often reduces the individual to an economic unit, valuing entrepreneurial success over social contributions, which contrasts with the more holistic view of personhood found in classical liberalism. Zygmunt Bauman describes such a contemporary condition as *liquid modernity*, the fluid state of society that is marked by fragmentation, isolation, and a sense of disempowerment amidst the rapid flow of global capital and information, leading to a new kind of dystopian reality.[225]

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[224] Source: https://stajcic.com/artwork/american-dream/
[225] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity,* Cornwall: Polity, 2000.

Susan Buck-Morss[226] observes such dystopian outcomes as a backlash to the failed modernist dreams, marked by mass deception, surveillance, and the erosion of public spaces and democratic engagement.

In the realm of post-postmodern narratives (as they are currently classified), this neoliberal *capable individual* is often portrayed as navigating a diminished public sphere, where the capacity for agency is paradoxically constrained by market forces. These narratives frequently challenge the notion of a truly autonomous subject, instead presenting characters who are labeled or feel like 'crap', 'waste', and 'trash', grappling with the omnipresent influence of corporate power and the complexities of identity in a commodified world. However, despite intensified constraints and limitations, we witness a resurgence of the subject's agency that decisively breaks with postmodern practice.

This agency comes in different forms. On one hand, contemporary protagonists engage in transgressions and disruptive behavior primarily to break free from the confines of their monetary (non)existence. However, as Daniel Cojocaru[227] comments, these dystopian narratives are successful in one aspect particularly – presenting extreme violence against the system as an ineffective tool for cultural or political renewal. On the other hand, their agency can be directed towards the optimal functioning or even mastering the coordinates of the brutal market mentality. Reacting to the myth of *capable individual*, they are revealing a potent tension – oscillating between the extremes of absolute control and total destruction – between rebellion and cynicism, but also, surprisingly, between nihilism and sentimentality. The prevailing theme is a quest for an effective transition from old to new forms of control, adapting to the altered coordinates of a combined physical and virtual hyperreality, and facilitating easier navigation through these complex landscapes. For these reasons, among others, we must strive to define a literary tendency that transcends (post-)postmodernism, the one that resonates more closely with contemporary dystopian

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[226] Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002.
[227] Daniel Cojocaru, *Violence and Dystopia, Mimesis and Sacrifice in Contemporary Western Dystopian Narratives*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015.

contexts and reexamines the postmodernist elements of transgression, fragmentation and disruption accordingly.

Baby, It's Still Cold Outside: The Legacy of Cold War

Never-ending Brinkmanship

Throughout the duration of the Cold War, there were four occasions that revealed the real potential for nuclear conflict:

1. The Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, considered the most dangerous threat of full-scale nuclear war during the Cold War, lasting for 35 days;
2. An incident in October 1973 over a dispute during the Yom Kippur War, where both the USA and the Soviet Union had their respective allies, representing one of the many proxy wars they waged;
3. A near miss in September 1983, when it was only the wise judgment of Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Petrov, who doubted the red alarm alert after assessing the situation, that prevented a nuclear war from starting due to a Soviet satellite malfunction mistaking the sun's reflection off the clouds for a missile launch;
4. A fourth incident arose from the Soviet misinterpretation of the US exercise code-named Able Archer 83 as signaling the imminence of an attack.[228]

From the beginning of the Cold War, the threat of a nuclear attack was an important aspect of diplomacy known as brinkmanship. These events represent several critical moments that heightened alertness among both politicians and the public. As McCauley notes, citing the originator of the term, such a persistent tactic created a backdrop of permanent global tension.

"Dulles was credited with inventing brinkmanship. He commented:
the ability to get to the verge without getting into the war is the necessary art.
If you cannot master it, you inevitably get into a war. If you try to run away

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[228] Martin McCauley, *The Cold War 1949-2016*, London: Routledge, 2017.

from it, if you are scared to go to the brink, you are lost. (Life, 30 January 1956)[229]

Staying on the brink corresponds well with Don DeLillo's concept of *white noise* in the eponymous novel,[230] which introduced the idea of the omnipresent background noise, filled with the hum of technology and media, saturated with information and misinformation and blurring the lines between reality and simulacra. Ultimately, the *white noise* signals the awakening of a pervasive fear of death, which serves as a psychological white noise for the characters in the novel. In that context, the Cold War powers' perpetuation of a state of brinkmanship serves as an example of the permanent *white noise* that characterized the era of the Cold War and postmodernism.

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a flood of media articles, social media posts, forum comments, and memes once again began saturating the online space with either thoughtless speculation of a greater global conflict or trivial interpretations of the war as another proxy battle between the USA (as one of the leading NATO countries) and Russia. Media outlets are once again addressing the subject of potential nuclear threats, reigniting fears of World War III.

The notion of brinkmanship has resurfaced so strongly that it feels as though it never truly dissipated. With the recent indictment of former US President Donald Trump for mishandling classified documents, including US nuclear secrets and military plans,[231] there is an unsettling reminder that the most devastating weapons of mass destruction are, after all, in the hands of individuals in power, whose actions are ultimately unpredictable.

However, despite this similarity, culturally we are not in the same position as we were at the dawn of the official Cold War era. Just as the geopolitical landscape has changed since the end of the Cold War, so have the mechanisms of soft power, an

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[229] ibid., p. 46.
[230] Don DeLillo, *White Noise,* New York: Viking, 1985.
[231] Jude Sheerin & Rebecca Seales, *What's in the Trump Indictment: US Nuclear Secrets and Files Kept in Shower*, BBC News, Washington DC, 9th June 2023. Source: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-65852286

equally relevant diplomatic tactic that aims to wage cultural wars on the non-violent battlefield.

Evolution of Soft Power

After World War II, the rich scientific and cultural heritage, and the assumed superiority and arrogance of European intellectuals (including those from the Soviet Union), were not yet fully within the USA's grasp, despite its burgeoning economic influence and the rise of mass media. The United States aspired to become a genuine epicenter of intellectual thought. The immigration of intellectuals to the US, predominantly to New York City before, during, and after World War II, injected fresh perspectives into the *free world*. Yet, many longed for a return to cities like Paris, then one of the world's most intellectually vibrant capitals. The US sought not only to import intellectual prowess but to foster and, crucially, *brand* its own.

"During the height of the Cold War, the US government committed vast resources to a secret programme of cultural propaganda in western Europe. A central feature of this programme was to advance the claim that it did not exist. It was managed, in great secrecy, by America's espionage arm, the Central Intelligence Agency. The centrepiece of this covert campaign was the Congress for Cultural Freedom, run by CIA agent Michael Josselson from 1950 till 1967. Its achievements – not least its duration – were considerable. At its peak, the Congress for Cultural Freedom had offices in thirty-five countries, employed dozens of personnel, published over twenty prestige magazines, held art exhibitions, owned a news and features service, organized high-profile international conferences, and rewarded musicians and artists with prizes and public performances. Its mission was to nudge the intelligentsia of western Europe away from its lingering fascination with Marxism and Communism towards a view more accommodating of the American way'.[232] […] Cultural freedom did not come cheap. Over the next seventeen years, the CIA was to

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[232] Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, London: Granta Books, 1999, p. 1.

pump tens of millions of dollars into the Congress for Cultural Freedom and related projects. With this kind of commitment, the CIA was in effect acting as America's Ministry of Culture."[233]

The establishment's effort to reforge the link between high art and government marked a Renaissance-like response to modernity, in which the ruling class was expected to patronize the avant-garde, much as monarchies and churches have historically done. The cultural battle was waged alongside scientific and economic conflicts. On one front, significant developments originated from the Cold War era, such as the foundation of NASA, the widespread adoption of television, and birth of the internet, representing key non-military arenas of competition. Conversely, popular culture propelled the English language to the status of the de facto *lingua franca*. Icons like Marilyn Monroe, both Louis and Neil Armstrong, along with Coca-Cola, became symbols of the American Dream, a notion that achieved global resonance.

> "The Soviet standard of living did not keep pace with the aspirations of the Soviet people; they could see that living standards in the GDR and Czechoslovakia, for example, were higher than in the Soviet Union; so Coca-Cola and jeans were more ideologically damaging than any capitalist propaganda."[234]

The recent exhibition *The Cool and the Cold*, presented at the Gropius Bau, one of Berlin's most significant museums, juxtaposed artworks as instruments of US and Soviet propaganda in the city that was once the epicenter of the Cold War. This is further evidence of the enduring interest in the origins and repercussions of cultural wars as a form of soft power. For this reason, observing how cultural outputs reflect shifts in contemporary political and economic dynamics is both interesting and necessary.

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[233] ibid., p. 129.
[234] Martin McCauley, *The Cold War 1949-2016*, London: Routledge, 2017, p. 292.

*From the Gropius Bau Berlin exhibition **The Cool and the Cold:
Painting in the USA and the USSR 1960–1990. Ludwig Collection*[235]

Integrating the neoliberal economy into the equation, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the official conclusion of the Cold War did not eliminate longstanding hostilities. Instead, it demonstrated how neoliberal capitalism unleashed new forms of totalitarianism, exerting influence globally and extending over both nations, which were once ideologically at odds. In the information age, the erstwhile emphasis on high culture has faded from the spotlight, and the cultural manipulations by agencies like the CIA and KGB now appear quaint and outdated. For postmodernists, the trope of *they* represented a nebulous enemy, whether internal (secret services) or external (the Cold War adversary). For contemporary authors, *they* has come to symbolize the omnipresent forces of corporations, oligarchs, and cartels, that dominate the unfair economic landscape, thus stifling any meaningful and sustainable change.

Consequentially, In the post-Cold War era, the terrain of soft power has been extended to encompass not only the elevated spheres of culture and popular culture but also the pervasive realms of 'low' or 'no culture,' as inherited from postmodernism and characterized by cultural theorists like Pierre Bourdieu[236] and Theodor W. Adorno.[237]

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[235] The exhibition was on display from 24th September 2021 to 9th January 2022. Photographed by the dissertation author.

[236] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984.

[237] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", in: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno and Gunzelin Schmid Noeri, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020, pp. 94-136.

This domain expanded to acknowledge the impactful reach of corporate narratives, contemporary internet phenomena and the explosion of trash culture. The concept of corporate soft power has been bolstered by the omnipresent influence of multinational companies, which, through aggressive marketing strategies and cultural imprinting, have fostered a proliferation of fabricated narratives that play with the idea of authentic experiences. Trash penetrated both our daily life and culture, including everything from fast fashion's cyclic trends to the proliferation of reality TV shows that prioritize sensationalism and immediate gratification. These aspects of soft power, though less traditionally esteemed than the fine arts, scientific achievements or space race, exposed a compelling capacity to redefine societal norms and ideological frameworks across the globe.

"The Jerry Springer Show is probably most known for its foul mouths, excessive fighting, excessive nudity and wacky stories. Nearly every episode, if not all, have at least one bleeped over foul word. Then there's the sound effects. A clanging bell indicates it's time for a fight! Whenever a fat woman shows her boobs, the sound of a cow going 'MOO!' is heard. Even the audience gets into it! Women show their boobs to get 'Jerry Beads'. Whenever a touching good moment happens or an audience member asks a goody goody logical

question, the audience chants, 'Go to Oprah'! TV Guide voted The Jerry Springer Show as the 'Worst Show In The History of Television.'"[238]

Although trash culture bloomed during the 1980s, still within the postmodernist framework, it gained unprecedented influence with the advent and democratization of social media and virtual spaces. Kevin Glynn argued in *Tabloid Culture: Trash Taste, Popular Power, and the Transformation of American Television*[239] that trash culture's dominance stems from the cultural-political impacts of the neoliberal Reagan era, which will only reach new heights with the increased use of the Internet, a medium where such content can circulate, distort, inform, and proliferate.

The internet phenomena such as troll and bot farms – meticulously documented in studies like Samantha Bradshaw's and Philip N. Howard's work on the *Troops, Trolls and Troublemakers*[240] report – successfully manipulate online discourse, sow discord, and shape political narratives. On that note, the article by RoBhat Labs,[241] the company that created an algorithm that helps identify political propaganda bots, analyzes the presence and behavior of political propaganda bots on Twitter, highlighting their sophisticated methods of manipulating discourse, spreading fake news, and influencing political dynamics. As such, they pose a challenge to maintaining the integrity of information and democratic conversation on the platform. The analysis shows, among other findings, that in the span of 24 hours, there is 5 time more propaganda bot tweets on the Twitter platform than the tweets of the real people's accounts. By flooding the social media space with propaganda material, they manage to sway and shift the opinions of a part of the public.

"Tweeting out fake news and misinformation

The images and story below are not real. However — they have been tweeted out by accounts classified as tweeting out political propaganda. In the first tweet,

[238] Source: https://www.metacritic.com/tv/the-jerry-springer-show/season-16/
[239] Kevin Glynn, *Tabloid Culture: Trash Taste, Popular Power, and the Transformation of American Television*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
[240] Samantha Bradshaw & Philip N. Howard, "Troops, Trolls and Troublemakers: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation", in: *Computational Propaganda Research Project,* Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute, 2017, pp. 1-37.
[241] RoBhat Lab, *An Analysis of Propaganda Bots on Twitter,* Medium, 31st October 2017. Source: https://medium.com/@robhat/an-analysis-of-propaganda-bots-on-twitter-7b7ec57256ae

the photograph of Obama awarding Bill Clinton is real, but the photos of Anthony Weiner, Bill Cosby, and Harvey Weinstein have been faked."[242]

Apart from their political effects, it is worth nothing their cultural impact as well. Using a 'trash' aesthetic in photo and video manipulation, often in GIF or meme formats, propaganda bots flood the digital space with both low-quality content and misinformation. By appropriating memes as formats that are inherently postmodern – using parody, irony, subversion and intertextuality, they obliterate both their aesthetic effect and socio-political function.

In *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism*, Henry A. Giroux[243] highlights the merging of reality with media spectacle and the decline of education and critical thinking, which erodes the public's capacity to differentiate between truth and deception. With the automation and proliferation of misinformation in the digital environment, the lines between truth and lies become even more difficult to discern. As Kathleen Hall Jameson has pointed out in her analysis of the impact of

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[242] ibid.

[243] Henry A. Giroux, *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism*, London: Peter Lang, 2011.

social media and disinformation in American politics, particularly the role they played in Donald Trump's election,[244] exactly these contemporary phenomena mark the resurgence of dystopian and totalitarian themes in public discourse.

Similarly, in *Consuming Russia*, *Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, various authors describe the effects of post-Soviet, post-Cold War restructuring of the political and economic landscape that permanently changed the physical and cultural landscape of Russia as well. As Adele Marie Barker points out in the essay *Rereading Russia*, the new cultural landscape of Russia presented itself through 'no style' trends in public spaces, retail businesses, new TV programming, pulp fiction, cruising strips, tattoo parlors etc.

> "Like Russia itself, this new popular culture finds itself tom between its own heritage and that of the West, between its revulsion with the past and its nostalgic desire to re-create the markers of it, between the lure of the lowbrow and the pressures to return to the elitist prerevolutionary past."[245]

In *Public Offerings: MMM and the Marketing of Melodrama*, Eliot Borenstein discusses a notable phenomenon that emerged in Eastern Europe and Russia between 1990 and 1994 – the pyramid scheme, the financial fraud that can also be labelled as a form of trash culture. Borenstein highlights that MMM in Russia was not merely a pyramid scheme, as it had cultural together with economic implications; it was distinguished by its use of "real-life" characters to entice viewers to invest, with promises of new furniture, travel, or even romance. This scandal, which ostensibly offered navigation through the new socio-economic landscape, seduced Russian citizens not just as viewers, but as participants and co-authors of a narrative that ultimately stripped them of both money and dignity. [246]

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[244] Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President – What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
[245] Adele Marie Barker, "Rereading Russia", in: *Consuming Russia*, *Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, Edited by Adele Marie Barker, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 4-5.
[246] Eliot Borenstein, "Public Offerings: MMM and the Marketing of Melodrama", in: *Consuming Russia*, *Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, Edited by Adele Marie Barker, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 49-75.

"MMM's foray into soap opera allowed the company to blur the boundaries between production and marketing, fiction and nonfiction, and public and private, to the point where the ads themselves became the company's greatest product: Mavrodi's medium was his message."[247]

"Commercials for Sergei Mavrodi's MMM pyramid financial investment scheme. This video includes first six advertisements of Lyonya Golubkov series with subtitles by Bradley A Gorski."[248]

Unsurprisingly, at the end of the 1990s and throughout the 21st century, the blurred lines between facts and fiction continued to intensify in Russia with further development of digital platforms. In *Russia: The Origins of Digital Misinformation*,[249] Sergey Sanovich examines how the Russian government utilizes digital propaganda, including trolls and bots, to protect Putin's regime and advance its foreign policy against Western interests, in response to domestic political competition and global market interactions. This digital armory, born from a neglected yet dynamic Russian blogosphere and a capable tech sector, is now facing increasing scrutiny and exposure, with implications that extend beyond Russia's borders.

The proliferation of trash culture since the end of 1990s and its penetration into the political and economic spheres serve as a testament to the evolving nature of soft power, transcending the traditional East/West dichotomy. In both the West and the East, soft power has morphed into a complex web of traditional media, digital

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[247] ibid., p. 50.
[248] Video screenshots and description source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9FA0b61zSE
[249] Sergey Sanovich, "Russia: The Origins of Digital Misinformation", in: *Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media*, Edited by Samuel C. Woolley and Philip N. Howard, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 21-40.

platforms, and cultural production. Through the democratization of media and the economic valorization of once-dismissed cultural forms, soft power now operates on a spectrum that seamlessly integrates and multiplies the content with mass appeal and trash aesthetics, reshaping the cultural, political and economic landscapes on a global scale. In many ways, trash culture, once existing only on the margins, has, much like plastic garbage, successfully penetrated and overwhelmed our reality.

"Can literature be equipment for post-postmodern living?"[250]

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[250] Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 146.

Part II: Quo Vadis, Postmodernism?

Foundations of Postmodernism

Although William Gaddis' novel *The Recognitions*,[251] often considered the inaugural work of postmodernist literature, was published in 1955, it was not until two decades after World War II that the new cultural paradigm of postmodernism was truly recognized and proclaimed in literature. It inherently set itself against, and was contrasted with, modernism – not merely as a literary movement, but across a broader cultural spectrum – and subsequently became the defining cultural manifestation of the post-war era. John Barth's essay *The Literature of Exhaustion*,[252] published in The Atlantic in 1967, is regarded as a manifesto of postmodernism, with authors such as Barth himself, Thomas Pynchon, Kathy Acker, Vladimir Nabokov, William Gaddis, Toni Morrison, Kurt Vonnegut, and William Gass counted among the movement's pioneers and most influential voices in the United States.

This short list alone illustrates the diversification of voices and perspectives that marked the literary surge of postmodernism – a movement emerging within the culturally and demographically altered framework of a post-World War II society that also underwent significant technological changes.[253]

Building on the varied voices that characterized the postmodern movement, the era encapsulated a response to the swift cultural and technological shifts that marked the latter half of the twentieth century. Postmodernism, recognizing the "age of acceleration" in its narrative structures and thematic concerns, mirrored the dynamism

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[251] William Gadis, *The Recognitions*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1955.

[252] John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion", in: *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*, London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984 (first published in 1967), pp. 62-76.

[253] "The changing character of fiction, thinking and technologically advanced societies was discussed in such essays as Irving Howe's Mass Society and Post-Modern Fiction (1959), John Barth's Literature of Exhaustion (1967), Leslie Fiedler's Cross the Border-Close That Gap (1967), Jacques Derrida's Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences (1988), and Francois Lyotard's Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism? (1993). Theoretical concepts of Postmodernism and its cultures were explored in Ihab Hassan's, Susan Sontag's, Gerald Graff s, Andreas Huyssen's, Linda Hutcheon's, Brian McHale's, Charles Jencks' and other theorists' works. All these authors have also suggested a difference between modernist and postmodernist societies and literature and have significantly contributed to the understanding of a new social reality, its changed sensibility and culture." Jaroslav Kušnir, *American Fiction, Modernism-Postmodernism-Popular Culture, and Metafiction,* Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2005, p. 15.

and fragmentation of contemporary life. It is within this context that Susan Sontag's observations come to light, reflecting on a society rapidly transforming under the influences of mobility, technological advancement, and cultural proliferation.

> "This new sensibility is rooted, as it must be, in our experience, experiences which are new in the history of humanity-in extreme social and physical mobility; in the crowdedness of the human scene (both people and material commodities multiplying at a dizzying rate); in the availability of new sensations such as speed (physical speed, as in airplane travel; speed of images, as in the cinema), and in the pan-cultural perspective on the arts that is possible through the mass reproduction of art objects"[254]

Mass media and the new pace of life fueled the main postmodernist impulse – to narrow the divide between high and low art and engage in radical experimentation with form and language. This aimed to dismantle the grand narratives of the past and foster a multitude of *mini-narratives* (as defined by Mary Klages),[255] re-envisioning and reinventing the past, present, and future. The narrator was no longer merely immersed in their own stream of consciousness but became elusive and unreliable, reflecting the disorienting nature of the self in a fast-paced and ever-changing reality. As Gerald Graff summarizes, postmodernism sought to signify the death of the concept of art and literature where high culture was once the repository of moral and spiritual wisdom. And as Scott notes, despite its *gamefulness*, it has been characterized in apocalyptic terms, such as *the end of the book, the death of the author,* and *the disappearance altogether of literature.* [256] The *accelerations* spawned by technological advancements and new media led to an accelerated fragmentation. Language began to mirror the added layer of existence, with television altering the delivery and interpretation of an increasingly hybrid stream of information and content.

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[254] Susan Sontag, "One Culture and the New Sensibility", in: *Against Interpretation and Other Essays,* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966, p. 296.

[255] "Postmodern 'mini-narratives' are always situational, provisional, contingent, and temporary, making no claim to universality, truth, reason, or stability.", Mary Klages, *Postmodernism,* Boulder: University of Colorado, 2001.
Source: https://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/~sflores/KlagesPostmodernism.html

[256] Steven D. Scott, *The Gamefulness of American Postmodernism: John Barth & Louise Erdrich*, New York: Peter Lang, 2000, p. 5.

"A typical evening newscast, for example, will bombard the viewer with a series of unrelated images in quick succession – a war in a remote country, a murder closer to home, a sound bite from a political speech, the latest on a sex scandal, a new scientific discovery, highlights from a sporting event. This collage is interspersed with advertisements for better batteries, better soap, better cereal, and better vacations. By giving all these varied images – news stories and commercials alike – roughly equal treatment, the broadcast leaves the impression that they are all of roughly equal importance"[257]

A still from Adam Curtis' documentary "Russia 1985-1999 TraumaZone: What It Felt Like to Live Through the Collapse of Communism and Democracy", episode 1[258]

It is therefore unsurprising that techniques such as pastiche, irony, intertextuality, referentiality, and metafiction would become the foundational elements of this new literary tendency. In its effort to bridge the divide between high and low art, postmodernism sought to redefine and repurpose genres traditionally seen as structurally and verbally straightforward, such as the western, thriller, detective genre, or even pornography. This was a response to the omnipresent language of

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[257] Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996, p. 34.
[258] Source: https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p0d3kv2z/russia-19851999-traumazone-series-1-7-part-seven-1995-to-1999

advertisements and propaganda, as manifestations of capitalism and commodification. Just as pornography offered a lens to explore the conjunction of the sexual revolution and mass media scrutiny, previously undervalued genres like science fiction and graphic novels paved the way for a new philosophical avant-garde (exemplified by works such as Stanisław Lem's *Solaris*[259]).

In a similar vein, new developments in art mirrored these societal shifts. Just as pop culture became a new form of soft power for the USA during the Cold War, pop art emerged to critique it. Pop art in the USA engaged with the tenets of capitalism and commodification, while on the other side of the Cold War, the Soviet Sots Art movement arose in response to the prevailing socialist realism. Literary advancements, unsurprisingly, had to mirror these artistic and cultural shifts accordingly.

Campbell's Soup Cans, Andy Warholl, 1962[260]
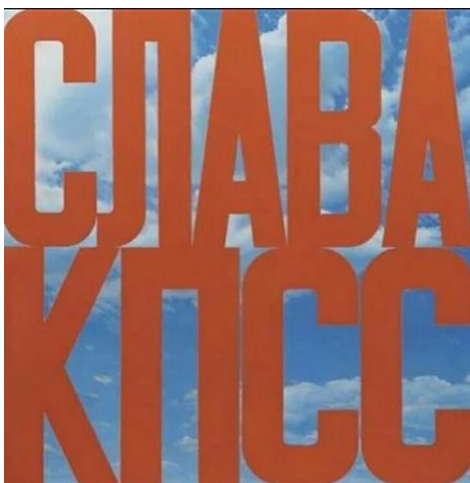
Praise to CPSU, Erik Bulatov, 1975[261]

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[259] Stanislaw Lem, *Solaris*, translated by Steve Cox, New York: Walker, 1970 (first published in 1961).
[260] Source: https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/andy-warhol-campbells-soup-cans-1962/
[261] Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/erik-bulatov/praise-to-cpsu-1975

Russian Postmodernism: A Unique Trajectory

In approaching the topic of Russian postmodernism, we will start with the Alexander Genis' comparison.

> "The task of defining the situation of contemporary Russian literature can be facilitated by borrowing a concept from Western aesthetics that we have just encountered in our brief overview. The borrowed formula is the follows:
>
> postmodernism = avant-garde + pop culture
>
> [...]
>
> In Russian postmodern culture, socialist realism has acquired the same function that pop culture once held for Western postmodernism, as pointed out by Leslie Fiedler. If this formula of Western postmodern aesthetics is transposed onto Russian aesthetics, then the new version of the formula is:
>
> Russian postmodernism = avant-garde + *sots-realism*"[262]

However, I would argue that to define Russian postmodernism accurately, we must consider the Soviet era of postmodernism, which is significantly more intricate. Soviet postmodernism had to evolve partially from an external standpoint, through the perspectives of émigré writers and the voices of dissidents who arose against the backdrop of harsh Stalinist totalitarianism, as well as during the more liberal period known as Khrushchev's Thaw (1956-68).

> "One might be tempted to establish similar connections between the postmodernism of Venedikt Erofeev, Andrei Bitov, Joseph Brodsky, and Sasha Sokolov and the culture of the Soviet version of the 'rebellious youth of the sixties': the culture of the Thaw, the culture of the '*shestidentatniki*' (the sixties generation)."[263]

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[262] Alexander Genis, "Postmodernism and Sots-Realism, From Andrei Sinyavsky to Vladimir Sorokin", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, pp. 203 and 206.
[263] Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos,* Edited by Eliot Borenstein, New York: Routledge, 2015 (first published in 1999 by M. E. Sharp), p. 3.

As Mark Lipovetsky notes, the Thaw was an effort to liberalize the Soviet system, which had been grappling with the aftermath of Stalin's cult of personality, from the time of his death to Brezhnev's rule. It was during this period that voices such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov emerged – who, while from an older generation, only gained recognition during the Thaw – as well as Andrei Sinyavsky (under the pseudonym Abram Tertz), and Joseph Brodsky. The Thaw also highlighted poets like Vladimir Vysotsky, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Andrei Voznesensky, Bella Akhmadulina, and Bulat Okudzhava, and prose writers such as Chingiz Aitmatov, Vasily Aksyonov, Yuz Aleshkovsky, Bulat Okudzhava, Andrei Bitov, Vladimir Voinovich, Georgy Vladimov, Anatoly Gladilin, Sergei Dovlatov, Venedikt Erofeev, and Fazil Iskander. In film and theater, directors like Andrei Tarkovsky, Yuri Lyubimov, Marlen Khutsiev, Larisa Shepitko, Nikita Mikhalkov, Andrei Konchalovsky, and Tengiz Abuladze made significant contributions. However, this period of attempted openness was short-lived, as many representatives of the Thaw period would become dissidents and form the third wave of émigré writers once Brezhnev came to power. Thus, even within this brief era of liberalization, there was a constant oscillation between writing *from within* (Soviet Union) and *from outside* (from exile).

Despite the rich legacy of Thaw writers, postmodernism in Russia is often linked with late Soviet conceptualism, which first emerged in the arts during the 1970s. The Lianozovo circle's poets from the late fifties and early sixties – Igor Kholin, Ian Satunovsky, Genrikh Sapgir, Eduard Limonov and many others – were precursors of what later became known as Moscow Conceptualism. Poets like Dmitry Prigov, Lev Rubinstein, and Vsevolod Nekrasov became vocal proponents of this movement, initiated by artists such as Vitaly Komar, Alexander Melamid, and Ilya Kabakov.

Convergence and Divergence: Postmodernism in the US and Russia Post-1970s

While Western postmodernists critiqued the grand narratives of freedom and progress, exposing the myths of consumerist societies and questioning purported freedoms, their Soviet counterparts operated within a context of suppressed freedoms or exile, often relying on samizdat publications. The explosion of mass media in the USA contrasted sharply with the collective consciousness fostered by the Soviet Union. Yet, both were deeply embedded in the Cold War paranoia, with each country's establishment reinforcing respective anti-Western or anti-Eastern narratives. Following World War II and the experiences with Nazi Germany, the Truman Doctrine,[264] established as American foreign policy in 1947 and underscored in Truman's speeches, waged a war against totalitarianism (and the ensuing paranoia). This doctrine successfully branded totalitarianism as a political regime and concept, positioning it as the paramount threat to global peace and freedom – traits once attributed to Germany and now seen as inherently Soviet.

> "What was striking about the émigré writers on totalitarianism was what they did not do: they did not explain totalitarianism as a national phenomenon. They did not situate it in German or Russian political history. They explained it as a product of modernity. Arendt, too, denationalized totalitarianism. She picked her examples from all over Europe."[265]

After the Cuban Missile Crisis, which was the closest point to the potential full-scale nuclear war, the Soviet Union had a major leadership shift. The year 1964 brought forth such different (and each in its own way paradigmatic and impactful) phenomena as Beatlemania and the start of Brezhnev era. The period of Brezhnev rule will prove to be the second longest after Stalin's, lasting until 1982. Within this period, the USA had had five different presidents, Lyndon B. Johnson (in office: 1963-1969), Richard Nixon (in office: 1969-1974), Gerald Ford (in office: 1974-1977), Jimmy Carter (in office: 1977-1981), and Ronald Reagan (in office: 1981-1989). This monolithic period

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[264] Source: https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/truman-doctrine

[265] Louis Menand, *The Free World – Art and Thought in the Cold War,* New York: Farrar, Straus and Girous, 2021, p. 109.

was simultaneously the time of political stabilization and economic stagnation (due to the halted economic reforms, it was named the Era of Stagnation), the period of détente and the attempt to close the gap created between the West and the East, but also the growing technological gap between them. Nevertheless, the relationship towards the literary voices was still repressive, even into the 1980s.

However, what is particularly interesting in this period is how postmodernism reacted to the respective realities. The 1980s in the USA were the age of the Yuppies, or the Yuppie postmodernism as elaborated by David Kaufmann (bringing such names as Brett Easton Ellis, Susan Minot, David Leavitt, Bobbie Ann Mason, Frederick Barthel, Jay McInerey, Raymond Carver etc.). It produced the Yuppie ads and the first Yuppie presidential candidate. And although they embodied the glamour of wealth in the age of a newly triumphant Reaganomics, they were also a reaction to the renewed threat of downward mobility.[266] Although the Yuppies were the protagonists of the myth of the glamorous American life, the paroxysm of the individual overachiever, appearing in ads, cinema, art and literature, they were the glittery distraction from the fact that the post-recession period of the USA was the period of reduced class mobility[267] and the period that started revealing the darker side of neoliberal narrative.

> "The *character* of the Yuppie has been so important for this decade because it embodies both the decade's predicament and its denial of that predicament. The Yuppie as a type manifests the fear of the defeat of the expectations on which the welfare state has rested. It also bears witness to contemporary means for metabolizing that predicament through an overwhelming, because compensatory, materialism. The fiction that has crystalized around the type of the Yuppie registers this new structure of feeling. The use of parataxis in this prose signals both the loss of complexes of meaning as well as ways of dealing with that loss. We therefore cannot blame it all on Ronald Reagan."[268]

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[266] David Kaufmann, "Yuppie Postmodernism", in: *Critical Essays on American Postmodernism,* Edited by Stanley Trachtenberg, New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1995, pp. 114-115.
[267] ibid.
[268] ibid, pp. 124-126.

Conversely, citizens of the Soviet Union experienced an era fraught with disillusions pertaining to prevailing national myths. The Brezhnev era, while politically stable, was marked by escalating state-level corruption, leading to stagnant class mobility where advancement was tied solely to party allegiance. This period saw the repression of creative expression, setting the stage for the emergence of postmodern writing. The evolution of postmodernism in the Soviet Union was characterized by its reliance on metafiction, challenging both Western and Eastern myths and the deteriorating dreams of a unified global reality.

> "However, the dramatic story of the Thaw (1956-68) unambiguously demonstrated that the established social structures could not accept even such timid attempts at greater freedom. No less dramatically, the period of "perestroika" showed that, under the pressures of a more consistent effort at liberalization, the only thing such structures can do is simply collapse. Certainly, this qualifies as a crisis of legitimacy. But at the same time, unlike in the West, the values of emancipation and liberalization have not been subject to inflation; on the contrary, they have become crucial not only for the liberalism of the sixties generation but more generally for the cultural and, in particular, literary developments of the seventies and eighties, including the evolution of postmodernism."[269]

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the official collapse of the Soviet Union, we witnessed an era that was bound to redefine the global narrative on multiple levels. The reunification of Germany, the fall of the Iron Curtain, the end of the Cold War, the proclaimed "victory of democracy," and the fall of communism, among others, marked this period. The 1990s emerged as a significant gap, as the notion of a redefined future hung in the balance, without a clear vision of what exactly that future might entail. In the tumultuous transition from communism to capitalism, post-Soviet Russia and former Soviet states found themselves in the throes of nascent democracies. This period was characterized by political instability, corruption, and the rise of

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[269] Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos,* Edited by Eliot Borenstein, New York: Routledge, 2015 (first published in 1999 by M. E. Sharp), p. 5.

oligarchs who amassed their wealth by exploiting the loopholes of perestroika, ravaging public properties, and exerting control over the fledgling Russian governments. With respect to periods of instability and 'shape-shifting', Lipovetsky examines the *trickster archetype* in Soviet and post-Soviet literature, asserting that Pelevin intricately politicizes this archetype by contrasting two distinct trickster strategies within post-Cold War Russian and postmodern culture. Pelevin employs a long-established metaphor equating politics with magic, which bifurcates into ur-fascist or neoliberal ideologies, representing the tension between the traditional Soviet and the Westernized post-Soviet paradigms, thereby emphasizing the transformed dynamics of the Cold War paradigm.[270] Boris Noordenbos adds to the East-West relationship through the parallels in Russian and US narratives, focusing on how Pelevin examines the concept of a new Russian identity. He highlights Pelevin's comment on mimicry and the deep-seated worry that Russia lacks its own cultural essence, leading to a superficial adoption of Western civilization's markers.[271]

Conversely, the 1990s in the United States – characterized by the 'Yuppie' phenomenon – was a time of Democratic leadership with Bill Clinton as President. This era, which furthered the neoliberal agenda, created a deceptive perception of an economic boom, a sentiment that would ultimately turn bitter, revealing the period as a disillusioning conclusion to the American Dream.

Defining this period in literature as *The 1990s and the Sexual,* Linda Wagner Martin portrays the United States in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's 1989 collapse as a nation experiencing a brief respite from political controversy, while simultaneously assuming an increased role as a global power.[272] However, this period of perceived stability was soon disrupted by significant events, including the global economic crash at the start of the 21ˢᵗ century and the 9/11 attacks. This period, for both sides of the world, and global reality in general, will prove to be synchronized in one

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[270] Mark Lipovetsky, "Splitting the Trickster: Pelevin's Shape-Shifters", in: *Charms of the Cynical Reason: Tricksters in Soviet and Post-Soviet Culture*, Brighton, Massachusetts: Academic Studies Press, 2011, pp. 231-266.
[271] Boris Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature and the Search for a Russian Identity*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
[272] Linda Wagner-Martin, *A History of American Literature: 1950 to Present,* Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2013, p. 225.

thing: the disillusionment with the new hope that the end of Cold War naively brought. Not surprisingly, this synchronicity in the disillusionment is matched with the synchronicity in the literary field.

> "And yet American and Russian postmodernisms, which developed in opposite directions from the 1960s on (the former from a monolith to diversity; the latter from disintegration to paradoxical versions of wholeness), came together at the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties; moreover; it is telling that the processes of postmodernism's poetic and aesthetic self-destruction are symmetrical."[273]

Beyond Post-Postmodernism: The Struggle is Real

In exploring Jean Baudrillard's cultural theories, we engage with the enduring notion of hyperreality and its representation of simulacra, pivotal for decoding the transition from postmodernism to subsequent cultural phases. Today, the omnipresence of the internet has magnified this hyperreality, blurring the lines between the authentic and the constructed, the tangible and the virtual, and thrusting us into a cultural domain where the digital and physical converge. As we navigate the digitally-saturated and economically complex landscape of the 21ˢ century, we are compelled to forge new connections between individual narratives and collective experiences, signaling a critical juncture that calls for the evolution of our conceptual frameworks. This evolution parallels Fredric Jameson's correlation of postmodernism with the dynamics of late capitalism, suggesting that just as postmodernism once mirrored the cultural logic of its time, our current era – reshaped by the forces of neoliberal capitalism – demands fresh terminologies to capture the transformed narrative fabric.

> "What we must now ask ourselves is whether it is not precisely this semiautonomy of the cultural sphere which has been destroyed by the logic of late capitalism. Yet to argue that culture is today no longer endowed with the

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[273] Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos,* Edited by Eliot Borenstein, New York: Routledge, 2015 (first published in 1999 by M. E. Sharp), p. 241.

relative autonomy it once enjoyed as one level among others in earlier moments of capitalism (let alone in precapitalist societies) is not necessarily to imply its disappearance or extinction. Quite the contrary; we must go on to affirm that the dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture is rather to be imagined in terms of an explosion: a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life – from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself can be said to have become 'cultural' in some original and yet untheorized sense. This proposition is, however, substantively quite consistent with the previous diagnosis of a society of the image or the simulacrum and a transformation of the 'real' into so many pseudoevents.[274]

If we revisit the inception of postmodernism, we find it aimed to bridge a specific gap: that between high and low culture, while defining its stance in relation to modernism. In contrast, emerging forms seek to bridge a different kind of gap. This new gap is widening exponentially in unforeseen directions, whether it be the divide between actual and virtual realities, or the growing disparity between the wealthy and the impoverished, exacerbated by the intensification of the capitalist paradigm.

In *Post-postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, Jeffrey T. Nealon provides a contemporary alternative to Jameson's canonic work and challenges us to consider the concept of "intensification" as central to understanding the evolution of capitalism and its influence on contemporary literature.

> "Post-postmodernism, on the other hand, seems to take 'intensification' (an increased spread and penetration) as its paradigmatic ethos, with globalization as its primary practice – all access all the time. And this historical shift of focus or orientation inverts (and maybe destroys) literature's privileged synecdochic role. In short, in our critical work throughout the humanities we no longer tend to go to the revelatory 'part' in hopes of grasping the larger 'whole' (arguing, for example, that reading *Gravity's Rainbow* gives us a window into the

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[274] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, p. 48.

workings of the world at large, the contradictory logic of everyday life); rather, we now tend to start with the larger, post-postmodern whole (e.g., globalization), of which any particular part (say, postmodern literature) is a functioning piece. To repurpose a quote from *Gravity's Rainbow,* it may be that post-postmodernism 'is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting-into' (Pynchon 1971, 3); and if that's the case, the 'disentanglement' function of literature (the interruptive, hermeneutic power of reading's hesitating slowness – its questioning of 'meaning') becomes increasingly less useful as a way to engage the superfast post-postmodern world."[275]

Adding to his assertion that the slowness of reading becomes less viable in the ultra-rapid context of the post-postmodern world, I would also propose that it simultaneously becomes an inherently subversive act. Similarly, it is precisely within the acceptance of intensification as the inevitability that we forge new paths towards literary creation, subversion and hermeneutics.

Building upon Jameson's notion that postmodernism mirrored a society captivated by simulacra and the transmutation of reality into a series of pseudoevents, post-postmodernism – with its intensified capitalism and proliferation of the simulacrum – suggests we have come to accept these pseudoevents as our new 'reality.' It is therefore unsurprising that, amidst the enduring legacy of postmodernism, we are witnessing the emergence of various expressions of new literary realism(s). Nevertheless, it is challenging to categorize the authors of post-postmodernism as those who have completely transitioned from postmodernism to a new form of realism. For this reason, I will look further into the contemporary literary developments, reflecting the emerging narratives of the 21st century.

Firstly, we can start with the renewed interest in history. Linda Hutcheon critiqued Fredric Jameson's approach to postmodernism for neglecting historical aspects, introducing the term *historiographic metafiction*[276] to describe works that are both self-reflective and historically conscious within postmodernism and as its

[275] Jeffrey T. Nealon*, Post-postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 149.
[276] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism, History, Theory, Fiction*, London: Routledge, 1988.

continuation. On one hand, we observe the evolution of diversity, with authors who have reacted distinctively to the legacy of postmodernism. Noteworthy among them are Alison Bechdel, Mohsin Hamid, Junot Diaz, Tao Lin, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Jennifer Egan, who have redefined American fiction by moving away from the traditionally dominant male, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) perspective. Furthermore, spurred by historical events such as Hurricane Katrina, the Great Recession, and the 9/11 attacks followed by the War on Terror, there has been a resurgence of interest in historical fiction built upon, but nevertheless, overcoming postmodernist principles. This is particularly evident in recent works that emphasize racial conflict, amplified by the intensification of the Black Lives Matter movement. Reflecting the fractured reality of these times, contemporary authors often mirror the chaos of the post-9/11 world in their return to fragmentation in their narrative structures.

> "The post-9/11 world is in fragments. The structure of these novels is also fragmentary, their plots told in pieces. There is little linear structure."[277]

Prominent writers utilizing recent American history as a backdrop include Ottessa Moshfegh with *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), Don DeLillo with *The Falling Man* (2007), Dave Eggers with *What is the What* (2006), and Claire Messud with *The Emperor's Children* (2006). Each of these authors, among many others, responds to the historical events surrounding the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath. Mitchum Huehls has noted a revived interest in history, which is also evident in the realist counterbalance to postmodernism in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) and *Freedom* (2010). This resurgence is also apparent in historical novels like Susan Choi's *American Woman* (2003), Dana Spiotta's *Eat the Document* (2006), Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke* (2007), and Rachel Kushner's *Telex from Cuba* (2008), all of which employ realist techniques. However, Huehls also remarks that these novels have not completely abandoned postmodernism; rather, they operate along a spectrum that

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[277] Linda Wagner-Martin, *A History of American Literature: 1950 to Present,* Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2013, p. 298.

ranges from realist to postmodern-experimental works, amidst the dynamic tension between postmodernism's break with history and a renewed *drowning in history*.[278]

Most importantly, Brian Kim Stefans asserts that we cannot address the evolution of post-postmodernism without acknowledging the vast array of approaches introduced by the internet and electronic text. Among the plethora of writers influenced by software for image, video, and text manipulation, we see the rise of serious electronic authors often categorized as "hypertext fiction." Michael Joyce with *afternoon: a story* (1990) and Shelley Jackson with *Patchwork Girl* (1995) stand out, both created using Eastgate Systems's pre-Internet Storyspace environment. However, as the Internet became ubiquitous, the scope of experimentation expanded beyond navigable fictions to create texts that are simultaneously more poetic, visual, and interactive. [279] This trend did not recede into a niche obscurity of experimentation; it foreshadowed developments in 21st-century prose. Jennifer Egan's novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, which incorporates PowerPoint slideshows, won the 2011 Pulitzer Prize – not merely for its experimental form, but because narratives within the digital environment have truly become an integral part of our mundane reality.

Nam June Paik – *I never read Wittgenstein (I Never Understood Wittgenstein),* 1997[280]

[278] Mitchum Huehls, "Historical Fiction and the End of History", in: *American Literature in Transition, 2000-20I0*, Edited by Rachel Greenwald Smith, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 143-144.

[279] Brian Kim Stefans, "Electronic Literature", in: *American Literature in Transition, 2000-20I0*, Edited by Rachel Greenwald Smith, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 193.

[280] © Nam June Paik Estate / Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie / Mathias Völzke. Source: https://www.nationalgalerie20.de/en/der-museumsneubau/vor-schau/in-preparation-iii-medienkunst

Philip Stevick, in the 1995 collection of essays on American postmodernism, recognized the imperative to define the axioms of new fiction in the United States, calling for a designation distinct from the term post-postmodernism. This new fiction emerges as a notably non-traditional form, seeking a specialized rather than a universal readership, thereby cultivating a deliberate communal sensibility. It embraces the 'bad art' of the contemporary era, not to undermine it but to elevate and intensify it. Furthermore, this development pursues this with a positive intent, prioritizing the observer's enjoyment as the foremost element. Deliberately eschewing aesthetic and philosophical depth, it clearly breaks away from the traditional illusionistic narrative approach. Ultimately, new fiction adopts a playful stance towards the writing process itself, a perspective traditionally seen only sporadically, thus *framing the act of writing as an act of play*.[281]

Mikhail Epstein, on the other hand, presents us with a catalogue of new poetries in Russia, which stemmed from the post-Soviet *dialogue with chaos*,[282] differentiating:

- **Conceptualism**, created in conversation with what is called sots-art in painting (Dmitry Prigov, Lev Rubinshtein, and Vilen Barsky)

- **Post Conceptualism, or the New Sincerity**, moving in the direction of nostalgia (Timur Kibirov and Mikhail Sukhotin)

- **Zero style, or the "Great Defeat"** of the author in the face of the overaccumulation of preceding cultures (Andrei Monastyrsky and Pavel Peppershtein)

- **Neoprimitivism** using a childish and philistine consciousness for with the most stable, familiar, and surface layers of reality (Irina Pivovarova and Andrei Turkin)

- **Ironic and grotesque poetry** provoking laughter rather than the feeling of metaphysical absurdity and emptiness (Victor Korakia, Igor Irteniev, and Vladimir Salomon)

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[281] Philip Stevick, "Scheherazade Runs out of Plots, Goes on Talking; the King, Puzzled, Listens: an Essay on New Fiction", in: *Critical Essays on American Postmodernism,* Edited by Stanley Trachtenberg, New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1995, pp. 61-67.

[282] Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos,* Edited by Eliot Borenstein, New York: Routledge, 2015 (first published in 1999 by M. E. Sharp).

- **Metarealism** embracing the higher levels of reality, the universal images of the European cultural heritage (Olga Sedakova, Ivan Zhdanov, Victor Krivulin, Elena Shvarts, and Olga Denisova)
- **Presentism** correlated with futurism but without being directed toward the future (Alexei Parshchikov and Ilya Kutik)
- **Polystylistics** uniting various discourses using the principle of *collage* and the resultant catastrophic disintegration of reality (Alexander Eremenko and Nina Iskrenko)
- **Continualism** voiding the counter meaning of individual words (Arkady Dragomoshchenko and Vladimir Aristov)
- **The lyrical archive, or the poetry of the disappearing "I,"** the most traditional of all the new poetries, emotionally nostalgic, archeological in its realistic subject matter (Sergei Gandlevsky, Bakhyt Kenzheev, and Alexandr Soprovsky)[283]

From this selection, it's clear there is a theoretical effort to differentiate the various directions that have emerged in the aftermath of postmodernism. However, these paths all exist within the same post-Cold War historical dialogue between the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia. In his examinations of post-Soviet narratives, and their 'undead' characters as trauma figures,[284] Alexander Etkind particularly stresses the importance of understanding these texts, primarily as the reaction to the historical trauma[285] of the Soviet period. Also exploring the 'undead' motif as the response to trauma, Helena Goscilo examines its psychological implications. She points out that trauma also serves as a catalyst for heightened self-awareness and

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[283] Mikhail N. Epstein, shortened and paraphrased from "A Catalogue of New Poetries", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, pp. 146-148.
[284] Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning. Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.
[285] Alexander Etkind, "Magical Historicism", in: *Russian Literature since 1991*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 104-119.

liberation from psychological repression, eliciting varied individual responses and repetitive coping mechanisms.[286]

It is noteworthy that, in contrast to the prevalence of the term 'post-postmodernism' among scholars analyzing US literature, Russian narratives – despite the acknowledged post-Cold War (or post-Soviet) developments – are still predominantly categorized under the umbrella of postmodernism. Nina Kolesnikoff has suggested the instability of the term postmodernism, suggesting that "there is a marked preference for the term 'metafiction' as the most precise and accurate label to capture the process of commenting on fiction through fiction itself".[287] Sharing the acknowledgment of history with Etkind, and elaborated similarly to the Linda Hutcheon's theory of *historiographic metafiction*, Clemens Günther observes a similar phenomenon in Russian postmodernism, proposing the idea of *metahistoriographic revolution*,[288] which developed as a reaction to a period of significant historical transformation from the Era of Stagnation to the present day.

The trend of New Sincerity, as a reaction to historical traumas, is evident in the works of many authors who grapple with the weight of history. This movement, which in the USA has its roots in the hyperrealist narrative described by David Foster Wallace,[289] has also been recognized as a significant post-Soviet trend in Russian literature since the perestroika era. Unlike Epstein, Ellen Rutten explores New Sincerity as a wider paradigm, seeing it in the United States and Russia as a response to the 9/11 attacks and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. While New Sincerity is often associated with nostalgia and sentimentality as a reactionary response to major historical events, Rutten introduces a more intricate debate about its nature. Regarding Russian New Sincerity, which historically predates the American version, she identifies three key elements: a) curative sincerity – the role of sincerity as collective remembrance, b) sincerity as a marketing strategy – a response to the commodification

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[286] Helena Goscilo, "Narrating Trauma", in: *Russian Literature since 1991*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 167-187.
[287] Nina Kolesnikoff, *Russian Postmodernist Metafiction*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2011, p. 27.
[288] Clemens Günther, *Die metahistoriographische Revolution. Problematisierungen historischer Erkenntnis in der russischen Gegenwartsliteratur*, Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2021.
[289] David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1997.

of emotions, and c) sincerity in a (post)digital world – sincerity triggered by the advent of digital technologies.[290] The shared aspects of using sincerity as *a therapeutic tool for cultural trauma and as an economic coping strategy*[291] in the post-digital reality indeed place New Sincerity at the forefront of significant literary trends in both the US and Russian contexts.

The imperative to transcend postmodern and post-postmodern labels becomes evident when we consider the recent literary responses to global and historical disruptions. The works of authors like Ottessa Moshfegh and Don DeLillo engage with the fabric of American history, not just to reflect reality but to scrutinize and question it, revealing a complexity that blurs the line between realist and experimental narratives. Mitchum Huehls's observation of a spectrum ranging from realism to postmodern experimentation underscores the inadequacy of existing literary categories to fully encapsulate this dynamic range.[292] Meanwhile, Brian Kim Stefans's commentary on the transformative impact of digital technology on literature[293] points to a new intersectionality of text, media, and reader interaction that traditional postmodernist critique fails to address.

In the Russian literary sphere, Mikhail Epstein's catalogue of post-Soviet poetries underscores a similar divergence from the monolithic classification of postmodernism. The nuanced distinctions within these movements, from Conceptualism to Metarealism, highlight a cultural and historical dialogue specific to post-Soviet Russia that postmodernist theory cannot adequately contain. The emergence of New Sincerity, both as a post-Soviet phenomenon and as an American response to historical traumas, further exemplifies a literary shift that demands a new lexicon. Ellen Rutten's exploration of New Sincerity through the lenses of collective memory, commodification, and digital interaction reinforces the need for a terminological evolution that reflects our intricate contemporary reality.

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[290] Ellen, Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism, A Cultural History,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017, pp. 13-24.
[291] ibid., p. 159.
[292] Mitchum Huehls, "Historical Fiction and the End of History", in: *American Literature in Transition, 2000-20I0*, Edited by Rachel Greenwald Smith, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 138-151.
[293] Brian Kim Stefans, "Electronic Literature", in: *American Literature in Transition, 2000-20I0*, Edited by Rachel Greenwald Smith, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 193-210.

Therefore, as we confront a world fragmented by digital proliferation and cultural saturation, the quest for a term that resonates with the zeitgeist becomes paramount. The literary movements of the 21st century mandate a definition that not only interlinks but also transcends the myriad poetics of our time. In examining the works of authors who matured in the post-postmodern era, we gain insight into a literary evolution that moves from postmodern dichotomies to a multiplicity that post-postmodernism alone cannot define. It is through this lens that we might begin to articulate the contours of a literary tendency that reconciles historical continuity with the complexities of the contemporary human condition – a tendency that could aptly be termed *hypertrashrealism*.

Hypertrashrealism

"It is what one comes to learn in a hypermarket: hyperreality of the commodity – it is what one comes to learn at Beaubourg: the hyperreality of culture."[294]

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[294] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 47.
[295] Peer Schader, *7 Dinge, die Real besser kann können muss als die Konkurrenz*, 2016, photo source: https://www.supermarktblog.com/2016/09/01/7-dinge-die-real-besser-kann-koennen-muss-als-die-konkurrenz/

This photo, taken from a blog that criticizes the shopping experience at German Kaufland supermarket stores – formerly known as Real – shows a less than idyllic scene. The reviewer, clearly dissatisfied, describes the stay in Real as being promoted as enjoyable. In Reality (a play on words here is entirely deliberate), what he sees are *two stained upholstered seats next to a dingy water dispenser with a swing-lid trash can that looks like R2D2's brother, who snores with his mouth open and smells like cheap booze.* [296]

This amusing comparison, which could be observed as a fine example of a mundane postmodern text, allows me to build further from the above quoted thought of Baudrillard, who views both a hypermarket and a museum as a paradigm of hyperreality. The trash can in the Real shop, the artificial usage of a natural landscape – produced in synthetic material and displayed as a backdrop – and perhaps the whole text dedicated to the shopping experience as well, symbolically introduce the main subject of my thesis: the moment when our narratives shifted from hyperreality to *hypertrashreality.*

At the very beginning of the 21st century, with the hyperproduction and hyperaccumulation of all material and immaterial things, we could not make a complete break with the hyperreality as defined by Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*,[297] nor could we make a complete break with the connection between postmodernism and late capitalism as defined by Jameson.[298] However, we could acknowledge their evolution. As we have explored, Nealon has marked the shift from postmodernism to post-postmodern literary developments through the evolution of late capitalism into the neoliberal capitalism where money is not produced from commodities or services, but rather directly from money. As he further points out, such a transformation embraces

[296] ibid.

[297] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.

[298] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.

the concept of "intensification" as central to understanding the evolution of capitalism and its influence on contemporary literature.[299]

By examining *The Condition of Postmodernity* in a postmodern novel, *Soft City* (1974) by Jonathan Raban, David Harvey points to the *plasticity of human personality* as a postmodern trope, extraordinarily elaborated, for instance, in the work of the postmodern artist Cindy Sherman. [300] (A few examples of her work are included in the Part IV of this thesis as well.). Adding to the concept of hyperreality as understood by Jean Baudrillard, Mikhail Epstein elaborates the shift from modernism to postmodernism in Russian postmodernism, as the dialectics of *hyper* penetrate most spheres of our existence, namely, a) science and culture, supported by technological developments, b) hyperexistentiality, embracing the absurdity of everything, c) hypersexuality, with the increased level of sexual imagery, steroid-based hypermasculinity, or plastic surgery-based hyperfemininity, where sex becomes a spectacle and a commodity, d) hypersociality, as the direct result of communism and the idea of communality (This, I would add, has its counterpart in the hyperindividuality of the Western ethos), e) hypermateriality, as *a means of legitimating abstract ideas in their scholastically enclosed finality.*[301]

All these apply to the post-truth age as well. But they do not address the element of trash as an increasingly important element. If hyperreality was the symptom of hyperproduction and hyperconsumption, consumerism, and commodification, it is now intensified not only by intensification of capitalism, but also of waste. In *The Trash Phenomenon*,[302] Stacey Olster reminds us that before DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) examined waste and nuclear intensification as the consequences of human activities, it was Pynchon in *The Crying of Lot 49* who also explored the topic of waste through the perspective of class (elite and preterite, a recurring trope in his other novels) as the

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[299] Jeffrey T. Nealon*, Post-postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 26.
[300] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, *An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1990, p. 7.
[301] Mikhail Epstein, "The Dialectics of Hyper, From Modernism to Postmodernism", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, pp. 3-30.
[302] Stacey Olster, *The Trash Phenomenon*: *Contemporary Literature, Popular Culture, and the Making of the American Century*, Athens, the USA: University of Georgia Press, 2003.

American model of hubristic living. Plastic as a material is thus perhaps the perfect sublimation of the contemporary human experience. Once seen as revolutionary, close to the ideal of molding our reality to every whim of our everyday needs, it turned out to be an indisposable burden, the curse of human attempts to conquer nature, and the metaphor of class division and historical weight.

The inevitability of trash was thematized as a post-Soviet experience as well, by the Russian artist, Ilya Kabakov, who formed a relationship with trash as an exploration of the cultural and historical significance of seemingly worthless objects. Kabakov used trash as a metaphor for the Soviet reality, a cluttered and dysfunctional system where everything is predisposed to end up as waste. This perspective is not merely critical but also deeply philosophical and aesthetic.

> "И.К.: Вся наша жизненная практика связана с идеей расчистки места для жизни и отодвигания мусора на край, на периферию. Мы постоянно разгребаем мусор, расчищаем пространство для нашего существования, которое, если мы этого не будем делать, снова засыплется им. Это какой-то «перпетуум мобиле». Но чистота никогда окончательно не побеждает, и грязь и мусор продолжают оставаться постоянным фактором нашей жизни. Это особенно характерно для нашей русской жизни.
>
> Мусор у нас – это синоним самого существования, поскольку нет никакого смысла вообще что-либо расчищать и строить, если все превратится в мусор. Образ нашей жизни представляется мне огромной мусорной кучей, которую невозможно разгрести."[303]

His conception of a trash museum is ambivalent, acting as a satirical comment on the preservation of art and the arbitrariness of value. He stages trash to critique the indiscriminate accumulation of items in contrast to the lasting impact of cultural experiences and memories. Kabakov's art transforms trash into a medium that challenges viewers to reconsider their perceptions of subjective and objective value and worthlessness. He elevates the mundane to the status of pure art by infusing it with

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[303] Илья Кабаков / Борис Гройс Р., *Диалоги*, Вологда: Герман Титов, 2010, стр. 74.

personal memories and historical contexts, inviting a reevaluation of what should be seen as cultural heritage..

By presenting trash aesthetically, Kabakov plays with the idea of attention and perception. He suggests that the act of exhibiting something gives it significance, regardless of its inherent value. His installations are not merely collections of objects but are charged with personal narratives that engage with the larger discourse on art, memory, and the human condition.

Kabakov's relationship with trash is symptomatic of his overall engagement with the societal, historical, and existential aspects of life in the Soviet Union and beyond. It is a relationship that blurs the lines between art and reality, inviting a deeper understanding of the world around us and our place within it. Perhaps, our ultimate acknowledgment of its true essence could have a cathartic effect, aiding us in progressing further.

> „Более того, именно, как ни странно, я чувствую, что именно мусор, та самая грязь, где перемешаны и не разделены важные бумаги от обрывков, и составляет самую подлинную и единственную реальную ткань моей жизни, какой бы чепухой и нелепостью это ни казалось со стороны.“[304]

The blurring of art and reality in Kabakov's 'trash museum' brings us back to the initial analogy by Baudrillard, where he compares hypermarkets and contemporary museums as paragons of the hyperreality phenomenon. The increasing relevance of literal trash in our natural and cultural environments and its symbolic potential calls for more serious acknowledgment. If we have come up with the concept of a landfill to dislocate and thus not see the rising level of trash, this concept is failing us as well, both in life and in culture.

Therefore, in the attempt to better understand new litterary developments, we must consider several layers of growing prevalence of trash, that is, its ecological, economic, socio-political, technological, and cultural implications. As examined in the section *Petroreality*, we are faced with an undeniable environmental urgency to address the ramifications of fossil fuel consumption, particularly oil, which has not only

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[304] Илья Кабаков, В НАШЕМ ЖЭКе, Вологда: Герман Титов, 2011, стр. 222.

polluted our spaces with its derivatives, such as plastic, but also monopolized economic and geopolitical dynamics. Sections *Neoliberal Dystopia* and *Never-ending Brinkmanship* delved further into new forms of totalitarianism as uniquely post-Cold-War developments, created from the tension between new forms of capitalism and the geopolitical landscape. Most importantly, there is a growing need to acknowledge the proliferation of trash culture within the cultural and digital space, which plays a significant role in the realm of new forms of soft power, as presented in the section *Evolution of Soft Power.*

When examining hypertrashrealism, marking the definite shift from postmodernism, it is possible to detect and explore its two potential interpretations:

- Hypertrashrealism as an evolution of Baudrillard's hyperrealism
- Hypertrashrealism as a disruption of Baudrillard's hyperrealism

Hypertrashrealism as an Evolution of Baudrillard's Hyperrealism

From this perspective, hypertrashrealism represents a transformation of Baudrillard's hyperreality, integrating ecological, economic, and political dimensions through the evolution from Bourdieu's[305] and Adorno's[306] concepts of 'low' and 'no' style to more recent theories like Joseph Mozur's *dermokratiia (crapocracy)*[307] and Justin Pickard's *Crapularity.*[308]

Mozur uses *dermokratiia (crapocracy)* to articulate the economic, political, and cultural decline observed in the post-Soviet context. This term encapsulates the shift from communism to a degraded form of democracy, marked by oligarchic rule, rampant consumerism, and manipulative media. Mozur, particularly through the works of contemporary Russian authors like Pelevin, depicts the fin-de-siècle despair in

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[305] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984.

[306] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", in: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno and Gunzelin Schmid Noeri, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020, pp. 94-136.

[307] Joseph Mozur, "Viktor Pelevin: Post-Sovism, Buddhism, & Pulp Fiction", in: *World Literature Today*, Vol. 76, No. 2, Norman: Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, 2002, p. 63.

[308] Justine Pickard et al, *Alternatives to the Singularity, A Collaborative Presentation for/by Grumpy Futurists*, Monoskop, 2011 (online publication).
Source: https://monoskop.org/images/0/03/Alternatives_to_the_Singularity_2011.pdf

societies grappling with these transitions, where discerning reality becomes an increasingly arduous task.[309]

This is further strengthened through theories acknowledging technological implications of contemporary existence. As an alternative to the presumed Technological Singularity, where AI is expected to surpass humankind, 'a group of grumpy futurists,' convened by Justine Pickard in 2011, formed a Google Doc list of 'singularities' that more accurately reflect the current zeitgeist.[310] These 'singularities', such as *The Trolololarity*, *The Droneularity*, and *The Bombularity*, to name just a few, can collectively be seen as different forms of *Crapularity*.[311] Justin Pickard's *Crapularity* theory presents a dystopian perspective on technological progress that is alternative to the popular technophobic idea of AI Singularity. Instead of the fear from artificial intelligence surpassing the mankind, it envisions a future overwhelmed by inferior, redundant technologies, leading to a disordered and inefficient reality. Such reality is "90% rubbish" (see the photo below).

The Crapularity

3D printing + spam + micropayments = tribbles that you get billed for, as it replicates wildly out of control.

90% of everything is rubbish, and it's all in your spare room – or someone else's spare room, which you're forced to rent through AirBnB.

A pile of worthless "crapjects" (neologism coined by @iftf)

Source: @justinpickard

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[309] Joseph Mozur, "Viktor Pelevin: Post-Sovism, Buddhism, & Pulp Fiction", in: *World Literature Today*, Vol. 76, No. 2, Norman: Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, 2002, p. 66.

[310] Justine Pickard et al, *Alternatives to the Singularity, A Collaborative Presentation for/by Grumpy Futurists*, Monoskop, 2011 (online publication).
Source: https://monoskop.org/images/0/03/Alternatives_to_the_Singularity_2011.pdf

[311] ibid., pp. 7, 9, 17, and 2, respectively.

[312] Justine Pickard et al, *Alternatives to the Singularity, A Collaborative Presentation for/by Grumpy Futurists*, Monoskop, 2011 (online publication), p.12.
Source: https://monoskop.org/images/0/03/Alternatives_to_the_Singularity_2011.pdf

In such a context, we observe the paradoxical quality of intensification to both strenghten and subvert the hegemonic structures. Therefore, hypertrashrealism – if seen as an intensification of postmodern hyperreal – suggests an increased emphasis on artificiality as a historical consequence, offering potential subversion through its acknowledgment, acceptance and reevaluation.

Hypertrashrealism as a Disruption of Baudrillard's Hyperrealism

Alternatively, and perhaps more accurately, this movement can be understood through a lens of disruptive tension. Here, the 'trash' component introduces a destabilizing force into the postmodern hyperreal paradigm, challenging and redefining our comprehension of realism in contemporary contexts. As such it implies:

- Ecological Implications – Confrontation and Reevaluation
- Economic Implications – Redefinition of Subversion
- Technological Implications of Trash: Redefinition of Interpretation
- Historical Implications – Memorization and Rehabilitation

Ecological Implications of Trash – Confrontation and Reevaluation

Joshua Ozias Reno's perspective[313] challenges the anthropocentric view of trash by emphasizing the need to consider environmental and cross-species impacts of waste disposal and management. Reevaluating waste's importance, especially recognizing our shared animal nature, goes beyond providing an alternative to social constructivism. It involves understanding how material and symbolic factors originally shifted our perspective on waste, which continues to influence our approaches to recycling and disposal.

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[313] Joshua Ozias Reno, "Toward a New Theory of Waste: From 'Matter out of Place' to Signs of Life", in: *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 31, No. 6, London: Sage Publications, 2014, pp. 3–27.

Turning to cultural revaluations of trash, the work of several theorists stands out. Boris Groys, in *On the New*,[314] discusses how the avant-garde, particularly through the use of readymades, challenged conventional ideas of artistic creativity and originality. This movement elevated everyday objects to artistic status, eroding the divide between the traditionally valuable and the mundane. The evolution of this practice has led to an increased use of trash in art. Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, in *Culture and Waste: The Creation and Destruction of Value*,[315] argue that waste is not just the end product of consumption but a significant cultural and value-shaping agent. They challenge the simplistic view of waste as solely destructive, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of its cultural role.

Furthermore, Gay Hawkins, in *Plastic Bags: Living with Rubbish*,[316] explores the intricate relationship between humans and waste, focusing on its moral and ethical aspects. She cites the example of the plastic bag scene in the movie *American Beauty*, which aestheticizes a floating piece of plastic, finding beauty in unlikely contemporary elements.

By acknowledging the physical essence of waste in narratives, hypertrashrealism transcends the postmodern preoccupation with interreferentiality as mere playfulness. It directly confronts landfills and recycling, treating them both as metaphors and tangible realities. This approach not only highlights the direct ecological impacts on the cultural landscape but also seeks to establish new parameters for understanding value. In doing so, hypertrashrealism serves as a poignant reminder of our responsibility towards environmental stewardship, urging us to reevaluate our relationship with the materials we discard and cultural narratives we build around them.

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[314] Boris Groys, *On the New,* London: Verso Books, 2014.
[315] Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, "Introduction: Cultural Economies of Waste", in: *Culture and Waste, The Creation and Destruction of Value,* Edited by Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, pp. ix-xviii.
[316] Gay Hawkins, "Plastic Bags: Living with Rubbish", in: *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, London: Sage Publications, 2001, pp. 5-23.

Economic Implications of Trash – Redefinition of Subversion

In the post-Cold-War era, as theorized by Kevin Glynn,[317] Adele Marie Barker[318] and Eliot Borenstein[319] (see section: *Evolution of Soft Power*), trash culture emerged alongside new forms of geopolitical control that crafted artificial "real narratives," intertwining political and economic realities. This period saw a decline in the middle class, as explored in Jennifer Patico's *Consumption and Social Change in a Post-Soviet Middle Class*,[320] which examines the impact of marketization on St. Petersburg's teachers. Once symbols of cultured consumption, they struggled to uphold their living standards, reflecting the wider reevaluation of values in the post-Soviet middle class.

Florian Cramer, in *Crapularity Aesthetics*,[321] expands on Justin Pickard's theory, analyzing these socio-economic implications of cultural subversion. He observes how the art world mirrors broader economic trends, like the subprime mortgage crisis, through the accumulation of low-value capital. The digitalization and commodification of art, especially evident in blockchain-based artworks, disrupt traditional concepts of value and ownership. The shift from oligarchs' private collections to freeport art vaults perpetuates an illusion of scarcity while aligning contemporary art with rapid, algorithm-driven digital trading.

Cramer criticizes contemporary art's alignment with critical theory, arguing that its entanglement in market dynamics undermines its radical critical potential. He suggests that contemporary art is deeply implicated in the *Crapularity*, a socio-economic condition characterized by ethical, financial, political, and aesthetic

[317] Kevin Glynn, *Tabloid Culture: Trash Taste, Popular Power, and the Transformation of American Television*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

[318] Adele Marie Barker, "Rereading Russia", in: *Consuming Russia*, *Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, Edited by Adele Marie Barker, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 3-11.

[319] Eliot Borenstein, "Public Offerings: MMM and the Marketing of Melodrama", in: *Consuming Russia*, *Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, Edited by Adele Marie Barker, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 49-75.

[320] Jennifer Patico, *Consumption and Social Change in a Post-Soviet Middle Class,* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.

[321] Florian Cramer, "Crapularity Aesthetics", in *Making & Breaking*, Issue 1, Online Journal of Avans University of Applied Sciences' Centre of Applied Research for Art, Design and Technology, Breda: makingandbreaking.org/article/crapularity-aesthetics/, 2018.

complexities. This necessitates a direct artistic response that addresses and updates the challenges posed by these evolving socio-economic conditions, moving beyond a detached critical theory stance.

In this framework, the essence of subversion transcends mere critique of socio-economic conditions. Instead, it resides in active engagement and redefinition of these conditions, challenging and transforming the foundational paradigms of significance in our 'Crapular' age. This shift represents a critical evolution from the cynical detachment typical of postmodernism to a realm of proactive agency within hypertrashrealism, previously deemed improbable, impossible, or simply naive.

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[322] Justine Pickard et al, *Alternatives to the Singularity, A Collaborative Presentation for/by Grumpy Futurists*, Monoskop, 2011 (online publication), p.4.
Source: https://monoskop.org/images/0/03/Alternatives_to_the_Singularity_2011.pdf

Both Sergey Sanovich[323] and Samantha Bradshaw with Philip N. Howard[324] examine the role of digital propaganda in political manipulation, aligning with the paradigm of digital trash aesthetics (see section: *Evolution of Soft Power*). Sanovich's focus is on the Russian government's use of digital tools for regime support and foreign policy, while Bradshaw and Howard document the global misuse of these tactics, highlighting their efficacy in distorting online discourse and undermining democratic integrity.

In *Crapularity Hermeneutics*,[325] Florian Cramer reexamines the Crapularity phenomenon through the lens of interpretation. He scrutinizes the intricate relationship between traditional hermeneutics and contemporary data analytics within the Big Data sphere. The central thesis posits that data analytics inherently involves a qualitative, interpretative process entwined with human input and subjectivity. This blend of qualitative interpretation and quantitative data processing can inadvertently perpetuate both low quality content and societal biases, leading to discriminatory practices in fields like predictive policing and targeted advertising. Cramer connects the interpretive challenges of Big Data to the rise of neo-fascism and right-wing movements, and the challenges of filtering the 'crap' culture.

Cramer examines the dystopian post-human concept of *crapularity* as a state where flawed human-designed systems result in inefficiency and errors, countering the optimistic narrative of technological singularity. This crapularity is linked with the resurgence of right-wing populism, which positions itself as an alternative to these failing systems, offering oversimplified solutions to the complex issues these technologies create. The author stresses that without critical engagement and ethical oversight, Big Data's use could exacerbate these dangerous political trends. Overall,

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[323] Sergey Sanovich, "Russia: The Origins of Digital Misinformation", in: *Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media*, Edited by Samuel C. Woolley and Philip N. Howard, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 21-40.
[324] Samantha Bradshaw & Philip N. Howard, "Troops, Trolls and Troublemakers: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation", in: *Computational Propaganda Research Project,* Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute, 2017, pp. 1-37.
[325] Florian Cramer, *Crapularity Hermeneutics,* Rotterdam: Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, 2016.

the text highlights the conflict between human interpretive wisdom and algorithmic information processing, advocating for a balance that acknowledges the importance of both aspects.

In the transition from postmodernism to hypertrashrealism, interpretation evolves to address the complexities of digital propaganda and trash culture, with a particular focus on the pivotal role of algorithms in shaping our dense virtual environments and their profound influence on contemporary socio-political realities.

The Trolololarity

Rampant viral AI with a penchant for 1970's Communist humour meets the always-on global interwebs... in your eyeballs.

In Russia, the Internet surfs YOU.

Source: @nraford

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[326] Justine Pickard et al, *Alternatives to the Singularity, A Collaborative Presentation for/by Grumpy Futurists*, Monoskop, 2011 (online publication), p.7.
Source: https://monoskop.org/images/0/03/Alternatives_to_the_Singularity_2011.pdf

Patricia Yaeger's *Trash as Archive, Trash as Enlightenment*[327] presents trash in literature as both a repository and a transformative agent, preserving ethnic histories and personal traumas while shedding light on the societal costs of cultural and environmental marginalization. It reimagines trash as a symbol of resistance and historical narrative, challenging societal commodification trends. Aleida Assmann's *Texts, Traces, Trash: The Changing Media of Cultural Memory*[328] discusses the evolution of cultural memory's mediums, transitioning from durable texts to ephemeral traces and material remnants of history. She explores how mass media and technology have impacted memory preservation, leading to a contemporary blend of remembrance and oblivion within cultural narratives, indicative of changing literary landscapes and the dynamics of forgetfulness.

The resurgence of realism in contemporary literature's relationship with trash involves both a renewed interest in history, as noted by Linda Hutcheon, and the transnational paradigm of *New Sincerity*,[329] as observed by Ellen Rutten. Rutten delineates New Sincerity's threefold essence – sincerity as collective remembrance, a counter to emotional commodification, and a product of digital influence – thereby establishing it as a pivotal literary trend in both the US and Russia, where it serves as a means of healing cultural trauma and adapting to economic realities in a post-digital era.

Hutcheon's concept of *historiographic metafiction*[330] within memory studies ads to this approach, highlighting a shift in cultural narratives towards historical memory objects, indicating a historical perspective of "reality." In the realms of "trash" and "realism," there's a deliberate move beyond mere subversive or satirical

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[327] Patricia Yaeger, "Trash as Archive, Trash as Enlightenment", in: *Culture and Waste, The Creation and Destruction of Value,* Edited by Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, pp. 103-116.

[328] Aleida Assmann, "Texts, Traces, Trash: The Changing Media of Cultural Memory", in: *Representations*, No. 56, Special Issue: The New Erudition, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, pp. 123-134.

[329] Ellen Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism, A Cultural History,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.

[330] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism, History, Theory, Fiction*, London: Routledge, 1988.

recognition of cultural devaluation and historical "truth" construction. Instead, there's an engagement with new, "realistic" representations of a media-saturated present and history, reflecting a "realism" that avoids ontological naivety and disbelief in an unmediated, stable world of referents.

The transition from postmodernism to hypertrashrealism marks an evolution from a cynical to a constructive approach to fragmentation. In this new paradigm, hypertrashrealism endeavors to reconcile the past with the present, piecing together dispersed fragments to construct a new reality. This reality not only confronts but also integrates historical traumas, actively working towards a cohesive understanding of disparate experiences.

The Bombularity

The Congress for New Urbanism meets *Fallout 3;* an old meme, really.

Make sure the houses are built *just* far enough apart, and everything will be fine. Eventually.

Source: @nraford, etc.

[331]

[331] Justine Pickard et al, *Alternatives to the Singularity, A Collaborative Presentation for/by Grumpy Futurists*, Monoskop, 2011 (online publication), p.17.
Source: https://monoskop.org/images/0/03/Alternatives_to_the_Singularity_2011.pdf

Hypertrashrealism in Practice: Comparative Analysis of Palahniuk and Pelevin

To concretize this theoretical exploration, in Parts III, IV, and V, I will undertake a comparative analysis of the prose of Chuck Palahniuk and Viktor Pelevin. As emblematic authors whose careers developed in the immediate post-Cold War era and flourished into the 21st century, their narratives provide a fertile ground for examining the transition from postmodernism to what I term *hypertrashrealism*.

The comparative analysis will be structured around chronologically relevant pairs of novels that capture and reflect their authors' responses to the changing socio-cultural milieu. This involves juxtaposing Palahniuk's *Survivor*[332], which delves into the dark undercurrents of media survivorship, with Pelevin's *Omon Ra*,[333] a work that scrutinizes the illusions of heroism within Soviet space exploration. The exploration extends to two seminal end-of-the-century novels, Palahniuk's *Fight Club*[334] and Pelevin's *Generation P.*[335] These two novel pairs, written in the first post-Cold War decade, provide insights into the individual's struggle against the grand narratives of their respective societies and into how postmodernism started disintegrating towards the 21st century. Lastly, the analysis will contrast two novels from the second decade of the 21st century: Palahniuk's *Beautiful You*,[336] a satire on the commodification of desire, and Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.*,[337] a dystopian take on media, war, and society. Here, it is more evident how the authors' prose evolved into *hypertrashrealism*.

Through this comparative approach, focusing on themes of transgression, disruption, and fragmentation, the analysis will not only underscore the continuity between postmodernism and hypertrashrealism but will also highlight the distinctive features that mark the rise of hypertrashrealism as framework for understanding contemporary literature. As such, it will lay the foundation for further exploration of elements of hypertrashrealism, as examined in Part VI of the thesis.

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[332] Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor,* London: Vintage, 2000 (first published in 1999).
[333] Victor Pelevin, *Omon Ra*, London: Faber and Faber, 1996.
[334] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996).
[335] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000.
[336] Chuck Palahniuk, *Beautiful* You, New York: Doubleday, 2014.
[337] Виктор Пелевин, *S.N.U.F.F.,* Москва: Эскмо, 2012.

"But in spite of so many scattered signs, the language in which transgression will find its space and the illumination of its being lies almost entirely in the future."[338]

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[338] Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression", in: *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews;* Edited with an Introduction by Donald F. Bouchard, translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 33.

Part III: The Dark Side of Stardom –

Transgression from the American and Soviet Myths in Chuck Palahniuk's *Survivor* and Victor Pelevin's *Omon Ra*

"Directed by Fritz Lang, the silent film "Woman in the Moon" (1929) is considered one of the first serious science fiction films and invented the countdown before the launch of a rocket. Many of the basics of space travel were presented to a mass audience for the first time."[339]

The original poster for Frau im Mond (Woman in the Moon), directed by Fritz Lang and released in 1929. [340]

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[339] Robert Weide, "The Outer Limits", a photo caption from a gallery of behind-the-scenes shots of movies featuring space travel or aliens, in: *DGA Quarterly,* Los Angeles, California: Directors Guild of America, 2012, p. 68.

[340] Source: https://gravitys-rainbow.pynchonwiki.com/wiki/index.php?title=Fritz_Lang

When Thomas Pynchon included this observation in his groundbreaking postmodernist novel *Gravity's Rainbow*,[341] it was intended to illustrate one of many countless, complex, and intertwined connections between past and present, fiction and reality, art and history, Eros and Thanatos. The cinematic countdown created by Fritz Lang as a suspense-building device will later become a real-life ritualistic practice both before the launches of the deadly V2 rockets in World War II or during the age of the space race, before the launch of the US (Apollo) and Soviet (Soyuz) spacecraft. Moreover, this tradition remains until this day, both in life and fiction.

In the satirical novels under examination here, *Survivor* by Chuck Palahniuk and *Omon Ra* by Victor Pelevin, the countdown plays a pivotal role in building not only suspense, but also their structure. In *Survivor,* the entire novel is written with backward pagination, starting from *in medias res* on the page 289 and chapter 47, leading to the final chapter and page 1 at the end, to signal the limited time during which the protagonist must narrate his story to the hijacked airplane's black box and thus possibly find an escape from the American Nightmare.

"Flight 2039, here's what really happened. Take one.

And.

Just for the record, how I feel right now is very terrific.

And.

I've already wasted ten minutes.

And.

Action."[342]

In *Omon Ra*, the countdown of the secret Soviet rocket launch towards the end of the protagonist's professional journey, supposedly one aimed at reaching the Moon, is at the same time the 60-seconds-long countdown, and a loud wakeup call for the protagonist to find his escape from the sour Soviet dream of fabricated cosmic heroism.

"I lived not far from the Cosmos cinema."[343]

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[341] Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow,* London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1973).
[342] Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor*, London: Vintage, 2000 (first published in 1999), p. 284 (please note that the pagination of this novel is numbered backwards, starting from the page 289).
[343] Victor Pelevin, *Omon Ra,* London: Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 5.

Mimicking the intense pressure of the expected rocket launch, these countdowns present highly risky and time-limited windows of opportunity for both protagonists to transgress from the confinements of their respective totalitarian stardoms through either one of two extreme measures – suicide or rebellion. Despite the protagonists' seemingly inescapable circumstances – their respective realms of *non-choices* – the countdown serves as a crucial juncture, presenting a rare and narrow opening for decisive action amidst a backdrop of constrained autonomy. Additionally, these windows of opportunity are illuminated through the countdown structure as it intensifies the urgency and focuses the protagonists' ability to act, delineating the stark contrast between imposed destiny and possible self-determination.

In *Survivor,* we follow Tender Branson, the last surviving member of a fictional death cult, the Creedish church. Presented as an extremely isolated, humble, and hardworking community, the cult members organized their existence through a clearly set hierarchy, by which the first son of the family is always named Adam, while all other sons are Tenders and daughters Biddies (*to tend* and *do the bidding*), their identity being thus boiled down to their function. Apart from Adams and selected Biddies, who stay in the community and procreate further, all other children are trained to live in celibacy and eventually become servants in the upper-class households of the *outside world* of the 1990s USA. By the cult's doctrine, their humbleness and servitude present atonement for their earthly sins that should secure them a worthy afterlife. Upon the signal of the central community members (that is, their mass suicide), they are to commit suicide as well. This event finds our protagonist, a Tender, working as a housekeeper of an upper-class married couple. In his free time, due to a mistake where newspapers mistakenly published his phone number instead of a suicide hotline's, Tender converses with countless individuals on the brink of suicide, often supporting their inclination to proceed with it. His strong death drive and nihilism get juxtaposed with his suppressed sex drive, challenged through the romantic interest in Fertility, a sister of one of the hotline users, Trevor, who commits suicide after talking to him.

Ending up as the only known survivor of the cult, Tender subsequently becomes the prey of a media agent who slowly transforms him into a national celebrity guru and miracle maker, distorting his body and his personal story on his path to the ultimate

American stardom. Upon the discovery that a great number of outside cult members were murdered (by his twin brother Adam), he is wrongfully accused of being the perpetrator, from which point he tries to escape both from his celebrity and Antichrist status. The reunion with his brother brings him to a sobering realization that the leading members of the Creedish church death cult were systematically exploiting children, conditioning them to celibacy, and subsequently living from their labor. Their supposed ideologically driven suicide was merely a desperate act after the decision of Tender's twin brother Adam to report them to the FBI for child exploitation. Adam, nevertheless, still conditioned to be suicidal, begs Tender to kill him, but also to survive and perform a revolution against the cult dogma, by surrendering to his sex drive freely.

Tender loses his virginity with Fertility, who, despite being considered sterile, becomes pregnant immediately. In his final fight for his own will to live, for his new identity, for freedom and for the safety of Fertility and their unborn child, he follows one of her numerous inexplicable visions, hijacking a plane, releasing all the hostages, and providing parachutes for the cabin crew and the pilot, eventually remaining alone in the plane to share his confession with the black box of the descending plane.

On the other side, we have *Omon Ra* by Victor Pelevin, that was written in 1992 but depicts events in 1970's Moscow, where we follow a motherless boy, Omon Krizomatov. The novel is indicative of the transitional period as it is a patchwork of Soviet bildungsroman and bildungsroman parody. On the surface, if understood as genre parody, the novel remains within the purely postmodern paradigm. However, as further analysis will show, it also presents the transformation of basic narrative – a genuine, new take on the bildungsroman in its updated form, signaling a shift away from postmodernism.

Omon, neglected by his alcoholic father, his indifferent aunt and faced with the overall grim reality of the totalitarian Soviet regime, dreams of becoming a space explorer, together with his best childhood friend Mitiok. Both inspired by the idea of an escape to a magical cosmic space, they apply for the military academy with noble intentions, only to discover the absurd dark reality of the Soviet military, the KGB secret service and the national space program. In a typically satirical setting, the military is presented as a horrific environment in which superiors amputate the legs of

the cadets as an homage to the legendary Soviet hero, Alexey Maryesev. Those who do become part of the space program, such as Mitiok and Omon, are forced into making an even greater sacrifice. Drugged and mutilated, they are transferred to the secret basement space of the infamous KGB Lubyanka building in Moscow, where the underground Zaraisk flying school takes place. In the fast-paced change of circumstances, voiceless, they have no choice but to agree to become part of a suicide mission, in which the rocket sent to the moon is secretly operated by several young men instead of automatic machines, thus hiding the lack of advanced equipment. The tragedy of such a *non-choice* becomes even significantly darker by the end of the novel, when Omon, after completing the mission, supposedly successfully *lands* on the Moon.

With the deliberately impaired vision of the improvised equipment, having lost his best friend Mitiok in the tests preceding the flight, and after losing all his other colleagues during the mission, he fails to kill himself as ordered, ironically, due to a misfired gun. Only because of this accidental event, he discovers that the whole time during the supposed space flight, they were in fact in a tunnel of the Moscow underground, never actually leaving planet Earth in the first place. Escaping the pursuing KGB soldiers determined to kill him after his failed suicide and witnessing a fake filming of another space expedition along the way, Omon manages to escape the Lubyanka building through the labyrinth of the underground tunnels, reaching a Moscow metro station, thus embarking on the first train to the unknown rest of his disillusioned and supposedly free life.

Despite depicting two different decades (1970s Soviet Union and the 1990s USA), both novels are written at the end of the 20th century and together form a mirroring reflection and reaction to the same Cold War and post-Cold-War phenomena and tropes that developed in the USA, Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, such as:

- cult mentality of *non-choices*
- alternative masculinity of loveless/lost sons
- performativeness of ideology
- marriage of church and state
- rise of the landfill
- transgressive escapism

A Star Is Born – The Cult Mentality of *Non-Choices*

To disregard the cult mentality at least partially as a legacy of Cold War paradigms would be careless. At its core, the counterculture movement in the 1960s was an attempt to redefine the American Dream, towards a pacifist narrative of anti-war and anti-nuclear weapons sentiments, sexual liberation and numerous civil rights movements. Unfortunately, just as the American Dream nurtured the cult of the individual and the cult of personality, a similar phenomenon developed within the counterculture movement as well, with the rise of esoteric new age religious movements, often controlled by charismatic (male) leaders and their megalomaniac ideations.

The home page header of the Heaven's Gate website, as updated prior to the mass suicide[344]

Two years before *Survivor* was published, in 1997, 39 members of the Heaven's Gate cult committed a mass suicide. Since their foundation in 1974, the cult built a new religion combining Christianity and science fiction, waiting for the Hale Bopp comet as their signal to leave their bodies and join the UFO that will take them to the promised Heaven. They saw their act as transformation rather than suicide, as presented in their

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[344] Source: https://www.heavensgate.com/

previous names, *Human Individual Metamorphosis* and *Total Overcomers Anonymous*. Although the history of alternative religious movements or mass suicide as rituals span across different periods and peoples, in the American reality Heaven's Gate mass suicide together with the controversial FBI Waco siege in 1993 (during which four federal agents and 82 members of the Branch Davidian cult were killed, including 28 children) were a sobering reminder of the dark side of the counterculture movement – the Tate–LaBianca series of murders in 1969, perpetrated by the Manson family and Jonestown (Peoples Temple Agricultural Project) mass suicide in 1978 (with 918 dead Americans, including 276 children, being the greatest single loss of American civilian life in a deliberate act until 9/11).

On the other hand, in the Soviet Union, the frenzy of the Space Race as one of the Cold-War battlefields transformed an initially humane and noble focus on the age of scientific achievements into a cult of cosmonaut personality inherited from the myth of Soviet heroes from the victory during World War II. Behind the celebrity status of many acclaimed cosmonauts, such as Vladimir Komarov, Valentina Tereshkova and Yuri Gagarin, icons of the supposed idealism of space exploration, lay a darker reality in which the KGB and the state apparatus often jeopardized the lives of their celebrated cosmonaut heroes and heroines due to the lack of adequate technologies and negligence within the space program missions, politically enforced through the constant pressure to surpass the USA in the Space Race. Both Vladimir Komarov and Yuri Gagarin died prematurely as the victims of the state Cold-War obsessions. They were both under immense pressure to achieve a Moon landing, in the immediate aftermath of an automated spacecraft exploration of the Moon and a subsequent flight which would send a dog into orbit for the first time. The planned Soyuz 1 model was controversial, as both Komarov and Gagarin, two cosmonauts who were supposed to be on the flight, did not believe the spacecraft to be technologically adequate for the mission. This opinion was shared by their superior, General Nikolai P. Kamanin, the Air Force General in charge of cosmonaut training from 1960 to 1971, who recruited and trained them, as well as Tereshkova, Leonov, Titov and many others. Through his diaries which became public after the Cold War, we get a glimpse into the internal disputes, professional negligence and failed attempts of the General and cosmonauts to prevent

the planned flight. Two days before the launch which would take Komarov's life, he wrote that "the ships and their level of testing do not give 100% confidence in the complete success of the whole flight programme".[345] The main source of discontent was Vasily Mishin, who became chief designer of the Central Design Bureau for Experimental Machine Building in 1966 and whose incompetent and stubborn behavior became the leitmotif of Kamanin's diary entries.[346]

> "Mishin was so drunk that he could barely move his tongue and we had to send him to bed. It pains me [to say this], but the realisation of our space programme to a great extent depends on the behaviour of a capricious, little organised and essentially not very bright man."[347]

As a consequence of the rushed preparations for the Soyuz-1 mission and a rescue plan for which Komarov was not trained, Vladimir Komarov died in a crash on April 22, 1967, becoming the first human being to die during a space flight. After such a tragedy, alarmed at the prospect of losing their celebrity cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the government decides to remove Gagarin from all future space programs. Unfortunately, this did not save him, as he died soon afterwards, in 1968, together with the flight instructor Vladimir Seryogin, in an airplane crash during a routine MIG-15 training flight, with the cause of the fatal crash remaining uncertain to this day.

At the end of 1968, Kamanin, who already felt extremely bitter after the loss of his own son, who died of meningitis two years after the war, felt the death of Gagarin as an even greater loss.[348] He concludes, in lament, that not only did the Soviet Union lose the moon race, they also lost Gagarin. In his final diary entry for the year, he says:

> "And so this difficult year is coming to a close, the year in which Gagarin passed away. The death of Gagarin will for the rest of my life remain my biggest misfortune."[349]

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[345] Hendrickx, Bart, "Space History – The Kamanin Diaries 1967-1968", in: *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society*, Vol. 53, 11-12, London: Soc., 2000, p. 391.
[346] ibid., pp. 384-428.
[347] ibid., p. 385.
[348] ibid., p. 424.
[349] ibid., p. 426.

With such historical perspectives in the background, we follow the protagonists of Palahniuk's *Survivor* and Pelevin's *Omon Ra*, inherently tender yet shaped by extreme circumstances, as they undertake a grueling journey from one death cult to another.

The satirical edge in *Survivor* presents the initial escape from the Creedish death cult as merely illusory, as the protagonist falls into the heart of an extreme, consumerist society that he had never experienced before, in which the cult of personality is no less controlling and destructive than his extremist religious group.

> "The agent's yelling that no matter how great you look, your body is just something you wear to accept your Academy Award.
> Your lips are only there for you to air-kiss a talk show host.
> And you might as well look great."[350]

Omon, on the other hand, looks to the sky, searching for an escape from the pressures of Soviet reality, believing that cosmic distance can release him from the earthly chains, only to discover that even the cosmos in the Soviet Union is yet another fabrication created by the state as the omnipresent cult.

> "As a child I often used to imagine an open newspaper, still smelling of fresh ink, with a large portrait of myself right in the centre (wearing a helmet and a smile), and the caption: 'Cosmonaut Omon Krivomazov feels just fine!'"[351]

Both the attempt of Tender to finally flee to Australia and the attempt of Omon to take that train towards an unknown location, as far as possible from the Lubyanka building, suggest the necessity of a semantic and literal dislocation from state violence and the socio-cultural paradigm they represent. In the race for stardom status, on earth and in outer space, both environments attack the individual with their fake myths of heroism and greatness.

Faced with the attack of the American and Soviet ideas of success and heroism, the absolute necessity of protagonists to physically remove themselves comes as a

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[350] Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor*, London: Vintage, 2000 (first published in 1999), p. 150 (please note that the pagination of this novel is numbered backwards, starting from the page 289).
[351] Victor Pelevin, *Omon Ra,* London: Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 39.

response to the state of constant *non-choices*. Just as Tender is being born into the cult and shaped by its dogma, the parallel goes further even when he escapes it. The edge of Palahniuk's satire here is that it shows no substantial difference between the cult of the Creedish community and the cult of the US daily reality. Tender behaves as the passive and submissive servant of the Creedish cult and its conditioning, only to become the passive servant of his own celebrity status and the media agent who maintains it.

> "The truth is there's always someone to tell me what to do. The church. The people who I work for. The caseworker. And I can't stand the idea of being alone. I can't bear the thought of being free."[352]

Omon, on the other side, chooses scientific curiosity and ancient Egyptian myths to escape the state of despair, only to be faced by the *non-choice* of becoming a part of a suicide mission wrapped in the promise of Soviet heroism. His apparent agency in choosing his profession disappears almost immediately from the first moment in the military school. From that point, he seems to be a passive element prone to the whims of every superior, as he is relocated underground, drugged during the numerous absurd tests, overworked, underfed, bereft by the loss of his only friend Mitiok (executed for not passing the esoteric reincarnation test), and sent to certain death, all for the sake of filming a fictional reality of Soviet space advancements.

> "So the news that my heroism would remain unknown was no blow to me. The blow was the news that I would have to be a hero."[353]

It is particularly interesting that both narratives seem to present the fatalistic environment of *non-choices* alongside a brief window of opportunity for agency, which facilitates the motif of a final transgressive escape. They contrast the mythical models of the American Celebrity (the cult of personality) and the Soviet Hero (the cult of cosmonauts) – figures with seemingly maximum agency where the subject's autonomy of action completely collapses and is replaced by total predetermination – with the

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[352] Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor*, London: Vintage, 2000 (first published in 1999), p. 160 (please note that the pagination of this novel is numbered backwards, starting from the page 289).
[353] Victor Pelevin, *Omon Ra,* London: Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 39.

micro-agency of a disillusioned individual, proving to be far more impactful and rendering the transition from the postmodern narrative.

The Alternative Masculinity of Loveless Children

> "Amphetamines are the most American drug. You get so much done. You look terrific, and your middle name is Accomplishment.
> "Your whole body," the agent is yelling, "is just how you model your designer line of sportswear!"
> Your thyroid shuts down natural production of thyroxine.
> But you still look terrific. And you are, you're the American Dream. You are the constant-growth economy."[354]

Tender and Omon by nature and inclination are unsuccessfully trying to step away from a dominant macho masculinity defined by the surrounding environment. Their passivity, vulnerability, submissiveness, and romantic inclinations are attacked by the environment through the direct and brutal attacks on their bodies.

Conditioned for celibacy, Tender's body moves from control by one cult to control by the American media and public as the new cult, only to be further and more drastically tortured. His agent puts a great effort into enhancing his body, filling it with steroids, submitting it to aesthetic interventions and extreme forms of exercise, to shape it to fit accepted and expected form of masculinity.

> "In contrast to this highly instrumental view of pain, Palahniuk's novels explore and affirm the possibility that pain undertaken as an act of will represents not only a conscious rejection of the rationalization of the body but also a reclamation of agency and authenticity in a culture that has commodified the individual and turned living bodies into mere instruments. It is crucial to note at this point that pain and suffering are matters not only of individual human

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[354] Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor*, London: Vintage, 2000 (first published in 1999), p. 136 (please note that the pagination of this novel is numbered backwards, starting from the page 289).

bodies but also of culture, making pain and suffering into an ideal site for the exploration of religion and the body."[355]

Omon and his co-students however, are surrounded by a cult of heroism that asks for body parts by way of tribute. The military academy students are faced with the necessity of having their legs preemptively amputated, while the space program participants must surrender their body in its totality for the sacred cause. The satirical amplification of the cult of war veterans through preemptive amputation stresses the masculine obligation to provide the body in part or totality, for the sake of honor, masculine self-actualization and heroic cult status.

> "'Boys! Remember the story of the legendary hero Alexei Maresiev, immortalized by Boris Polevoi in his book *The Story of a Real Man!* The hero our college is named after! He lost both legs in combat. But after losing his legs, he didn't lose heart, he rose up again on artificial legs and soared into the sky like Icarus to strike at the Nazi scum! Many people told him it was impossible, but he never forgot what was most important – that he was a Soviet man! A Real Man! And you must never forget this, never, wherever you are! All the flight-training staff and I personally, as assistant flight political instructor, promise that we will make Real Men of you in the shortest possible time!' […] I had no feeling at all in the lower part of my face, as though it had gone numb. I guessed that my mouth must be bound and gagged too, but before I could feel surprised, I was struck by horror: where Slava's legs should have been, the blanket fell straight down in an abrupt step, and the freshly starched blanket cover stained with red blotches like the marks left on cotton towels by watermelon juice."[356]

In both *Survivor* and *Omon Ra*, the bodies of loveless, vulnerable children are transformed into battlegrounds for totalitarian paradigms. The protagonists' maturation

[355] Eric Repphun, "Every Story is a Ghost: Chuck Palahniuk and the Reenchantment of Suffering"*,* in: *Religion and the Body, Modern Science and the Construction of Religious Meaning*, Edited by David Cave and Rebecca Sachs Norris, Leiden: Brill, p. 130.
[356] Victor Pelevin, *Omon Ra,* London: Faber and Faber, 1996, pp. 31-33.

is depicted as a journey from complete surrender to the reclamation of control over their bodies, marking the initial and most critical front in the battle against oppressive states.
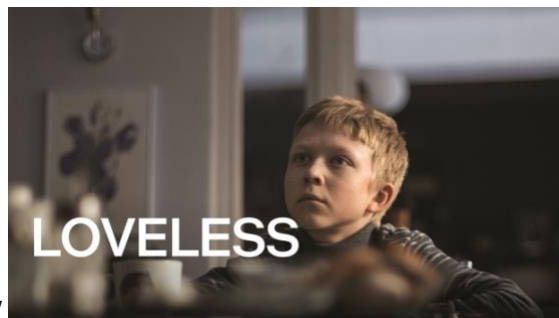
Scenes from the movie "Kids" by the American film director Larry Clark (written by Harmony Korine) and the movie "Loveless" (2017) by the Russian film director Andrey Zvyagintsev (co-written by Oleg Negin)

This neglect of children is explored in the American coming-of-age film *Kids*[359] and the Russian movie *Loveless*,[360] both of which present children falling into some form of abyss, either through transgression or disappearance (a probable suicide). These are hardly surprising themes in post-Cold-War USA and Russia, countries who had built their entire identity on the glorious victory in World War II and the obsessive mutual conflict that followed. In the complete spectrum of their transparent bleakness, piercing through the cult of family and its most vulnerable parts – children, they present the loveless space of trauma, despair, and violence in both the West and the East.

Similarly, both examined novels, *Survivor* and *Omon Ra,* focus the sharp edge of their satire on the exploitation and neglect of children, but with a more obvious and direct attack on the national paradigms. In *Survivor*, children are tools for a community

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[357] Source: https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/23/fashion/kids-20th-anniversary-chloe-sevigny-rosario-dawson.html

[358] Source: https://mubi.com/films/loveless

[359] Larry Clark, *Kids*, written by Harmony Korine, produced by Independent Pictures, The Guys Upstairs, Killer Films, Shining Excalibur Films and Kids NY Limited, distributed by Shining Excalibur Films, 1995.

[360] Andrey Zvyagintsev, *Loveless,* Screenplay by Oleg Negin, produced by Arte France Cinéma, Why Not Productions and Les Films du Fleuve, distributed by Walt Disney Studios Sony Pictures Releasing (Russia), Pyramide Distribution (France), Lumière Publishing (Benelux) and Alpenrepublik Filmverleih (Germany), 2017.

based upon slavery, conditioned from birth and with no position to decide on their choices. They are not accustomed to parental love or care, nor are they even aware of their own sacrifice wrapped in the package of religious doctrine.

> "My mother was inside the kitchen ironing and folding the clothes I'd be allowed to take with me. My father was I don't know where. I'd never see either of them again.
>
> It's funny, but people always ask if she was crying. They ask if my father cried and threw his arms around me before I left. And people are always amazed when I say no. Nobody cried or hugged.
>
> Nobody cried or hugged when we sold a pig either."[361]

But the lack of parental care from biological parents is only the tip of the iceberg. The USA that adopts this survivor of a loveless family is no less, if not even more cruel to him after his life in a cult. His final escape from the loveless position implies literal escape from the USA as the most loveless parent. To regain his position of a member of a healthy family, he first needs to regain control of his sex drive, taken away from him by the Creedish church death cult. But more importantly, he needs to escape his country's locking embrace and regain control of his public image and his physical body, which has become heavily addicted to celebrity status as a compensation for any genuine emotion or sexual sensation. The process is humorously named *Attention Withdrawal Syndrome*.

> "I need moisturizer. I need to be photographed. I'm not like regular people, to survive I need to be constantly interviewed. I need to be in my natural habitat, on television. I need to run free, signing books."[362]

On the other hand, in *Omon Ra*, we have a motherless boy, in a patriarchal context (the only female character in the novel is his indifferent aunt, and even she is almost devoid of agency) neglected by the alcoholic father, who is offered, in exchange a sadistic motherland.

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[361] Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor*, London: Vintage, 2000 (first published in 1999), p. 274 (please note that the pagination of this novel is numbered backwards, starting from the page 289).
[362] ibid., pp. 54-53.

"I don't remember my mother too well. The only memory I have is of my drunken father in his uniform trying to pull his pistol out of its holster while she clutched at his arm, her hair all messed up, and shouted: Matvel, come to your senses!"[363]

This sadistic motherland built by controlling and paranoid fathers, strips Omon, his friend Mitiok, and the remaining students of any choice, of any agency, of transparency, of genuine care and, crucially, of their bare existence. They are adopted only with respect to their ability to serve the dystopian system. Their dreams are shaped by propaganda, only to be exploited and manipulated, making their destinies pre-determined and absolute in their tragedy. Instead of love, the motherland's proponents offer pride, which is distorted in its very nature by a grotesque national hubris.

In both novels, the children are not meant to survive to old age, their suicide is both requested and expected, and they are taught to see themselves as worthless outside of the common goal, creating a certain similarity between seemingly radically different capitalist and communist systems. The fulfilled, happy mundane life is exchanged for the false promise of stardom – heavenly eternal life or the opportunity to reach the stars. In this equation, love is compensated by some form of glory, some sparkling illusion of cosmic fulfillment. Consequently, unlike in *Kids* and *Loveless*, the children here are not merely the collateral damage caused by the avalanche of the collapsing society. They are being purposedly and deliberately used as powerful tools for maintaining the scenography of it, in its decadent and violent performance, only to be discarded as a waste.

The contrast of different forms of violence within the environment and the atypical vulnerability of masculine characters aligns with their transgressive escape despite the odds. It resonates with vulnerability studies from the perspective of transgression, body and gender theories that deal with the aspect of sensitive and seemingly passive bodies acquiring the space for agency. Judith Butler's writings[364] on how social norms and power dynamics shape the vulnerability and precariousness of

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[363] Victor Pelevin, *Omon Ra,* London: Faber and Faber, 1996, pp. 4.
[364] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London: Verso, 2004.

bodies, particularly those that transgress conventional gender norms, correspond to Tender and Omon as atypical protagonists shaped by those forces. The ultimate agency acquired by such protagonists signals the argument of Martha Albertson Fineman[365] that vulnerability is a universal and inherent aspect of the human condition, which should be the foundation for social policy and law, rather than a characteristic ascribed to the marginalized groups.

Performativeness of Ideology

> "Part of my job is gardening, so I spray everything with twice the recommended strength of poison, weeds and real plants alike. Then I straighten the beds of artificial salvia and hollyhocks. The look I'm after this season is a fake cottage garden. Last year, I did artificial French parterres. Before that was a Japanese garden of all plastic plants. All I have to do is yank all the flowers. Sort them, and stick them all back in the ground in a new pattern. Maintenance is a snap. Dull flowers get a little touch-up with red or yellow spray paint."[366]

The illusion of a thriving American society is depicted as a highly skilled performance, encompassing everything from grand narratives to minor details. This portrayal extends to the Creedish church's death cult community, which only superficially renounces its sinful existence. The entirely fabricated media persona of its last survivor is paralleled with the cinematic portrayal of the space program in *Omon Ra*, revealed to be nothing more than a propaganda film set in the Muscovite underground. The various depictions of reality in the narrative are simply artificial backdrops. The subtle acts of defiance, such as Tender planting plastic flowers in his employer's garden, symbolize the comment on the superficial and consumerist nature of their opulent lifestyle.

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[365] Martha Albertson Fineman, *The Autonomy Myth, A Theory of Dependency*, New York: The New Press, 2005.

[366] Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor*, London: Vintage, 2000 (first published in 1999), p. 221 (please note that the pagination of this novel is numbered backwards, starting from the page 289).

"The '80s, in short, was the decade when the dictates of the market became a kind of secular monotheism in the US, thereby opening the door to the now-ubiquitous 'corporatization' of large sectors of American life: welfare, media, public works, prisons, and education. In fact, such a market dictatorship, honed in the many palace coups that were '80s LBOs, has become the dominant logic not only of the US economy, but of the fast-moving phenomenon known as 'globalization.' Downsize, outsource, keep the stock price high - those are the dictates of the new global version of corporate *Survivor*."[367]

The US class subordination was transferred to the family dynamics of the Creedish church death cult – Tenders status vis-à-vis his parents and Elders is essentially replicated when he enters the job market. His position as a member of the working class in the context of late-20th Century US capitalism is depicted as no less exploitative than his previous role in the cult. To jump up the class ladder or maintain the celebrity status he needs to perform – either suicide as the ultimate ritual of his initial cult or the series of prophetic miracles as the Survivor in mainstream USA.

"In the culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, performative texts have been on the increase. […] Maybe the most decisive role is played by what anthropologists label as the link between performativity and liminality: the word becomes performative in the cultural space of newly established or violated, unstable meaning, where performance is always connected to transgression, to the crossing (violation) and undermining of symbolic borders. After all, the twentieth century with its extremely radical modernization, leading often to a refutation of its own foundation (as testified by GULAG and Auschwitz), was in this sense a strong stimulator for transgression and for the production of liminal states."[368]

[367] Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 3.
[368] Brigit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama,* Bristol: Intellect, 2009, pp. 41-42.

In Omon's world, the entire scenography of the state system is falling apart. We witness the dilapidated spaces, the improvised equipment, the decayed bodies of the superiors and the repetitive underwhelming menus in the school canteen. There are hardly any airplanes left, and the remaining few circulate near the borders as a repeated show for the American spies. In one of the conversations between Omon and his friend Mitiok, it is revealed that the nuclear tests in the Soviet Union used to be artificially fabricated during the Stalinist era by making two million political prisoners jump at the same time. The entire national identity is constructed around this absurdly complex performance, staged for *the adversary* and *the global audience beyond*. The astronomic endeavors are also therefore imagined through the gaze of this supposed audience. The most blatantly disturbing performance of this mentality, shaped by the Cold War is seen in Henry Kissinger's visit to the Soviet hunting ground, where the animals hunted are in fact real soldiers, Ivan Popadaya and his son Marat, dressed as bears and wild boars. Their overall function in the Soviet military system is to pretend they are wild animals during sports hunting, with the costumes and props successfully serving the illusion that they are all aware of. They present the humiliating deconstruction of the *Soviet hero*, stripped of basic humanity by being transformed into a sacrifice animal for political ends. The comedy and tragedy of the soldiers occupying this role reach an apex during this particularly significant Cold-War era visit.

> "The accident happened a long time ago when the American politician Kissinger visited our country. He was conducting important negotiations, and a lot depended on whether we could sign a provisional nuclear arms limitation treaty (this was especially important, because our enemies must not be allowed to know that we never had any nuclear arms). So Kissinger was entertained at the very highest state level, and all the various state services were involved – for instance, when it was discovered that he liked short, plump brunettes, a quartet of plump brunette swans was found to drift across Swan Lake on the stage of the Bolshoi Theatre, under the glinting gaze of Kissinger's horn-rimmed spectacles up in the government box.
>
> It was thought easier to negotiate while hunting, and Kissinger was asked what he liked to hunt. Probably in an attempt at subtle political witticism, he said he

preferred bears and was surprised and rather alarmed when next morning he was actually taken hunting. On the way he was told that two bruins had been lined up for him. These two were none other than the Communists Ivan and Marat Popadaya, father and son, the finest special-service huntsmen in the reserve."[369]

The consequential absurd death of Ivan Popadaya (knived by Kissinger in a direct attack) performed in front of his son Marat, breaks their roles of pure comic relief to portray the nonsensical tragedy of the systemic fabrications. Bolshoi Theatre being rearranged for this trivial purpose is widened to the scale of the entire country, which orchestrates and fakes every single detail of its existence, only to serve the obsessions within the Cold-War dichotomy.

Marriage of Church and State

"The percentage of Americans belonging to a church or synagogue steadily increased from 50 percent in 1940 to almost 70 percent in 1960."[370]

A significant part of the Cold-War performativeness of state ideology in both countries was their respective stances towards religion, and the long-lasting effects and consequences that these developments created. The victorious sentiment in the USA after World War II, a rapidly recovering economy and a technological and nuclear weapon superiority firmly established the USA as the leading global superpower, but also the country that attempted to claim the higher ground of righteousness. When put in the context of Cold-War tactics, the growing trend of the religiousness in the USA did not come organically, but rather in the form of a state project that would contradict the atheism of the communist archenemy.

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[369] Victor Pelevin, *Omon Ra,* London: Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 59.
[370] James D. Beumler, "America Emerges as a World Power: Religion, Politics, and Nationhood, 1940-1960", in: *Church and State in America: A Bibliographic Guide, Volume 2: The Civil War to the Present Day*, Edited by John F. Wilson, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1987, p. 225.

"Whilst Abstract Expressionism was being deployed as a Cold War weapon, America had turned up an even more potent discovery – God. Religious faith in the moral law had been enshrined in the Constitution of the United States in 1789, but it was during the height of the Cold War that America discovered how useful the invocation of the highest hosanna could be. God was everywhere: He was in 10,000 balloons containing bibles which were floated across the Iron Curtain by the Bible Balloon Project in 1954; His imprimatur was stamped on an act of Congress of 14 June 1954 which expanded the Pledge of Allegiance to include the words 'One Nation Under God', a phrase which, according to Eisenhower, reaffirmed 'the transcendence of religious faith in America's heritage and future; in this way we shall constantly strengthen those spiritual weapons which forever will be our country's most powerful resource in peace and war'; He even began to appear on dollar bills after Congress ordained that the words 'In God We Trust' become the nation's official motto in 1956."[371]

Envisioned as the politically and culturally defining part of US identity and part of the narrative of the USA as the righteous warrior that arrogantly believed it can bring world peace through its global influence and American Dream, religion was further serving the purpose of promoting the USA not only as the God-loving nation but also the God-given nation. What such a narrative brought further, from the 1960s to today is the internal intensification of religious identities connected to the area of politics, but also the future narratives of mainly conservative presidents who represented the predominantly white Protestant supremacy.

"In the early 1960s many observers found it hard to believe, Johnson's essay notes, that religion exerted any real 'independent influence upon public affairs.' […] That interpretation of American public life seems less plausible now than it did earlier. This is in part because a number of recent scholarly investigations have suggested a clear correlation between voting behavior and religious

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[371] Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, London: Granta Books, 1999, pp. 279, 280.

affiliation. It seems less plausible, too, because of the highly visible – and often extremely controversial – role religious leaders and religious bodies have played in American political life since 1960. The jailing of Martin Luther King, Jr. in Birmingham, Alabama, Daniel and Philip Berrigan's pouring blood on draft files, Jerry Falwell's referring, in a benediction at the 1984 Republican national convention, to Ronald Reagan and George Bush as 'God's instruments in rebuilding America' – such phenomena vividly demonstrated the continuing relationship between religion and our national political life. And, of course, they provoked heated debate upon the proper relation of church and state."[372]

What we observe in the post-Cold War reality depicted in *Survivor* are the direct consequences of actions taken during the conflict – specifically, the fixation on religious identity as an opportunistic strategy that ultimately became a template for other facets of daily life. The political stagnation, the deceptively uneventful 1990s, and the superficially benign events concerning religious movements were merely a façade, as reality began to fracture, exposing the throbbing underlying issues within American society in the wake of the Cold War.

On the other hand, a novel created in the period of post-Soviet Russia, *Omon Ra* is still fixed on the paradigm of the Soviet Union, in the period in which state apparatus and overwhelming corruption was a predecessor of the collapse of the society that followed. State-enforced atheism as part of the communist dogma created a huge gap in the connections between people and spirituality, which provoked the turbo-charged version of Orthodox Christianity emerging after the Cold War, in which the church started serving the nationalist agendas of the rising oligarchic and autocratic rule, which will ultimately end up in the rise of Vladimir Putin.

"I especially liked Ra, the god the ancient Egyptians believed in thousands of years ago. Probably I liked him because he had a falcon's head, and pilots and

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[372] David Harrington Watt, "Religion and the Nation: 1960 to the Present", in: *Church and State in America – A Bibliographical Guide, The Civil War to the Present Day,* Edited by John F. Wilson, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1987, p. 271.

cosmonauts and all sorts of heroes were often called falcons. I decided that if I really was made in a god's image, then it should be this one."[373]

The narrative in *Omon Ra* portrays the crushing weight of corrupt Soviet ideology and juxtaposes it with a resurgence of spirituality through the ancient myths of Amon Ra, linked to dreams of astronomical achievement. This foreshadows the future of post-Soviet *minimal religion*, as defined by Epstein, where the nation attempts to redefine itself by reverting to a distorted form of Christian identity, seeking comfort in mysticism, adopting alternative religions, or creating a patchwork of all these elements.

> "Post-atheism accepts this 'disappearance' of God but interprets it as a sign of His authenticity rather than evidence of His absence. God presents Himself as the crisis of (re)presentation, as the refutation of the realistic fallacy in theology. Atheism thus prepares a way for minimal religion, which addresses God in the *poverty* of His manifestation"[374]

The cover photo of the 2016 Al Jazeera article: **Russia's Communist Party turns to the Orthodox Church**, *After decades of militant atheism, Russian Communists turn to religious establishment to gain supporters.*[375]

The lingering effects of the Cold War on the relationship between state and church in both countries, despite diverging paths, ultimately led to similar adverse

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[373] Victor Pelevin, *Omon Ra,* London: Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 68.

[374] Mikhail Epstein, "Minimal Religion", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, p. 165.

[375] Source: https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2016/12/12/russias-communist-party-turns-to-the-orthodox-church

outcomes. For Tender, the solace in female intuition (presented through Fertility's esoteric visions) and romantic and sexual love, as opposed to the imposed puritanism of the death cult and the impotence of the steroid-driven mainstream USA, is thus the most powerful transgression. For Omon, the same transgression lies in the escape from the omnipresent state as the only accepted divinity to the yet unknown horizon of the new life and its reimagined spirituality, although it definitely arrives in *the poverty of its manifestation*.[376]

Rise of the Landfill

When Susan Sontag invited us to abandon hermeneutics and embrace the erotic potential of art,[377] she certainly could not have predicted that we would experience an age in which we would also explore ideas like *Crapularity*[378] by which the accumulation of material and immaterial rubbish would prevail over both humans and machines (and therefore, art itself as well). Perhaps in the Palahniuk's satirical idea of PornFill, the portmanteau of *porn* and *landfill*, we can make peace between both. The conversion of the former Creedish cult lands into a dumping ground for obsolete pornographic materials, aptly named PornFill, underscores the inherent corruptibility associated with pornography. The subsequent rise in taxes on pornography sparks national outrage, illustrating the scenario's significance in showcasing the commodification of sexuality and America's consumerist tendencies. More critically, it echoes Segal's observations[379] on the deep-seated reliance on pornography, revealing a profound absence of control over the American populace's sexual impulses and decision-making.

> "What else I want people to know before my plane crash is I didn't dream up
> the idea for the PornFill. [...] It was not my idea to take all twenty thousand

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[376] ibid.

[377] Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation"*,* in: *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966, p. 10.

[378] Florian Cramer, *Crapularity Hermeneutics,* Rotterdam: Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, 2016.

[379] Lynne Segal, "Changing Men: Masculinities in Context", in: *Theory and Society*, Vol. 22, No. 5, Dordrecht: Springer, 1993, pp. 625-641.

acres of the Creedish church district and turn it into the repository for this nation's outdated pornography. Magazines. Playing cards. Videocassetes. Compact disks. Worn-out dildos. Punctured blow-up dolls. Artificial vaginas. The bulldozers are out there twenty-four hours a day pushing mountains of that around. This is twenty thousand acres. Two-zero-zero-zero-zero acres. Every square foot of Creedish property. Wildlife is displaced. The groundwater is contaminated."[380]

By creating the portmanteau made of porn and landfill, not only does Palahniuk create a witty comment on the prevalence of the extremely lucrative porn industry, but he also draws the parallel between dirt, rubbish and material trash and human sexual desire/drive. The excess of instrumentalizing nature is transferred to the excess of instrumentalizing sexual desire turned into the turbofuel of capitalism.

> "The cultural space of late capitalism is suffused with the representations of commodity aesthetics and mass-media entertainment. These are understood to supply the dominant forms of cognition and imagination. Hence the postmodernist preoccupation with artifice, spectacle, dreck and kitsch. These features of a 'debased,' commercial mass culture become the materials of an art whose relationship to (high) modernism is, in consequence, rendered ambivalent. On the one hand, it rejects the grounds for the latter's 'elitist' faith in its own (suprasocial) transcendence. On the other hand, this art is animated by the distinctively modernist impulses to innovate and transgress formal conventions. Under these circumstances, it is said, the (high-modernist) distinction between art and mass culture has collapsed."[381]

Utilizing a land once steeped in Puritan values as a dumping ground for US sexual consumerism provokes Adam's retaliation, who aims to obliterate both of these contrasting facets of the USA. The excessive totemism of sexual acts, the eroticism of

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[380] Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor*, London: Vintage, 2000 (first published in 1999), pp. 100-99 (please note that the pagination of this novel is numbered backwards, starting from the page 289).

[381] Paul Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists, Barthelme, Coover, Pynchon,* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991, p. 4.

objects with regards to their monetary value, and the prostitution of Fertility as the fake and supposedly sterile professional surrogate, are contrasted with the suppressed deadpan approach to sex by Tender, the protagonist, who is conditioned for celibacy. The sexual act within the romantic setting, the loss of his virginity with the woman he develops genuine romantic feelings for, and the conception of a child in a world that is portrayed as highly exploitative and cynical, is a seemingly simple yet ultimately a rebellious act.

DIRTY WHITE TRASH (WITH GULLS) by Tim Noble and Sue Webster[382]

The pervasiveness of the garbage reality is present in *Omon Ra* as well. The gaze towards the stars is the only aspect that elevates Omon from the garbage-dump misery of poverty-stricken Soviet existence.

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[382] Work made in 1998, 6 months' worth of artists' trash, 2 taxidermy seagulls, light projector, Dimensions variable. Source: http://www.timnobleandsuewebster.com/dirty_white_trash_1998.html

"I suddenly felt disgusted to think that I was sitting in this lousy little closet that smelt like a garbage dump, disgusted by the fact that I'd just drunk cheap port from a dirty glass, that the entire immense country in which I lived was made up of lots and lots of these lousy little closets where there was a smell of garbage and people had just been drinking cheap port, and most important of all – it was painful to think that those very same stinking little closets were the settings for those multi-coloured arrays of lights that made me catch my breath in the evenings when I happened to look out of some window set high above the twilit capital. And I all seemed particularly painful in comparison with the beautiful American flying machine in the magazine."[383]

The envy of the American flying machine as observed in the Soviet youth magazine is a reflection of a time in which western (and particularly US) technology, comfort, values and quality of life were seen as superior, liberated from the chains of economic inferiority and state-controlled art and existence. The images of Omon's everyday are the images of dilapidation, garbage, alcoholism, and decay. Craving for cosmic environment is seen as purification, as a leap from the inevitable and irreparable paradigm of trash. The stars are the last resort in Omon's patriotic feeling of self-worth and trust in national identity and individual purpose. The mutilation and perversion of that dream before his (sexual) maturity leaves Omon with a blunt realization that there is nothing but garbage in his physical and semantic space, and that his escape will have to be horizontal after all, earthly, rather than the escape upwards towards the stars.

In *Omon Ra*, the motif of garbage is intricately woven into the fabric of the narrative, manifesting across tangible, cultural, and symbolic domains. Tangibly, it surfaces in the squalor of cramped living quarters and the ubiquitous presence of low-grade alcohol, signifying socioeconomic degradation. Culturally, it signifies the stagnation of a society where creativity and autonomy are stifled by an omnipresent, authoritarian state. Symbolically, garbage transcends mere physical refuse, encapsulating the desecration of human potential through the state's cosmonaut program, where the bodies of children, mutilated and sacrificed, are rendered as

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[383] Victor Pelevin, *Omon Ra,* London: Faber and Faber, 1996, pp. 22-23.

disposable as the waste that pervades their environment. This inclusion of the body politic as part of the garbage motif amplifies the critique of a system that commodifies its citizens as expendable objects, further grounding the celestial aspirations of its youth in a grimly corporeal and corrupted reality. Here, we see what Julia Kristeva formulates as *abjection of the human body*[384] and Giorgio Agamben as the concept of *bare life*,[385] where state renders its citizens as disposable – akin to garbage – stripped of their humanity and agency within the political sphere.

The fall of communism and the Soviet Union experienced by Pelevin's generation brought a false idea of dismantling such a garbage narrative, through painful transition of a once robust communist system into a weak, brief and artificial democracy, on the wings of the much-envied American Dream and neoliberal capitalism. But just as in the accumulated PornFill of Survivor, what came with that democracy, built on the landfill of Soviet leftovers, was only further acceleration of the trash-driven state.

> "Many Russians of Pelevin's generation would argue that it is easy to find such striking incongruities in Russian society. They would point out that *demokratiia* (democracy) is for foreign consumption and *piar* (p.r. or public relations), while in fact Russians must satisfy themselves with *dermokratiia* (crapocracy). While many Russians of the 1960s generation take pride in the new Russian democracy, the reality, in the view of Pelevin and his admirers, is a less than democratic government heavily manipulated by a small circle of 'oligarchs,' often referred to as 'the family'."[386]

The characters' journeys become emblematic of a broader human struggle to find meaning and purity in a world that is submerged in degradation and disposability. This struggle is quintessentially transgressive as it requires a violation of the norms and boundaries of the worlds they inhabit. In this narrative, escape becomes an act of

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[384] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

[385] Giorgo Agamben, *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

[386] Joseph Mozur, "Viktor Pelevin: Post-Sovism, Buddhism, & Pulp Fiction", in: *World Literature Today*, Vol. 76, No. 2, Norman: Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, 2002, p. 63.

defiance in the face of systems that treat humans as refuse, opening a path to redefining personal and national identities amidst the ruins.

Although the end of the *Survivor* is purposely left ambiguous, the author himself left a clue and confirmed the suggestion that Tender ultimately saves himself from the plane by keeping a parachute for himself, and by playing his previously recorded story from a tape recorder to the black box, which allowed him both physical escape, the innocence in the eyes of the public, as well as the fake death, thus a new identity and a new life with Fertility somewhere in Australia.

Where Omon goes from the Moscow station after his liberation is not clear. Programmed to look up for salvation, where did his horizontal escape bring him? Escaping his death, into which semantic field of his afterlife does this train take him to? Is it towards the opposite of the binary relationship – the escape towards the non-communist West, towards the future redefinition of post-Soviet national identity, or to the further break with all earthly narratives, towards the sunrise of some neo-Amon Ra mentality? Unlike Palahniuk, Pelevin does not reveal the destiny of his protagonist. Nevertheless, what we cannot deny is their mutual and certain, at least temporary if not absolute, miraculous and remarkably transgressive escape.

Transgressive escapism

What we can see on the next page is the photo representing the term *Mammals* in Wikipedia. Among some of the typical examples of mammals, such as kangaroo, squirrel, whale, elephant, panda etc., we also naturally have humans as the species that falls under this category. However, the choice of the photo that represents our species is rather humorously peculiar, as it shows Leonid Brezhnev and Richard Nixon during the Soviet leader's U.S. visit and talks in 1973. Flanked by those two, we see the interpreter Viktor Sukhodrev. The link from that photo leads to the term and Wikipedia page *human*.
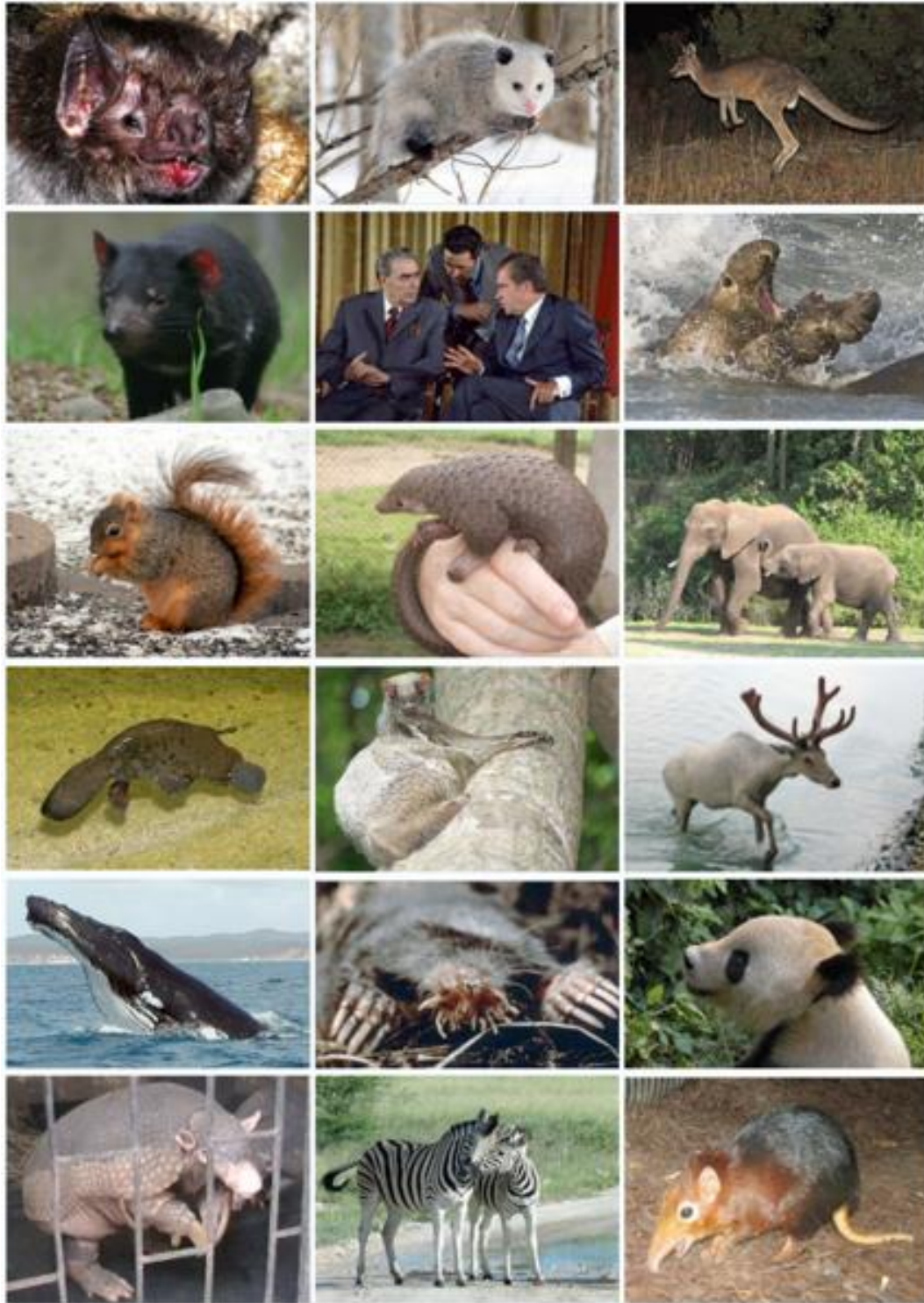
The photo itself represents one of the high points of the era of détente, the relaxation of tensions between USA and Soviet Union during the Cold War. One would think that a human being in encyclopedic entry would be an Everyperson, a representative that would not entice any sort of implication apart from a purely biological one. On the contrary, the chosen photo entry feels postmodernist, it is historically and politically referential, ironic, humorous and subversive. Was it chosen by chance or on purpose? Does it represent the hubris of our species, bound to bounce between permanent conflicts, geopolitical inclinations, white supremacy and patriarchy, or is it hopeful, believing in some sort of symbolical détente between the forever opposing drives, Eros and Thanatos? Or does it stress something completely different, something in the background, the need for interpretation, in the scenario by which Viktor Sukhodrev is the central figure of the photo?

Both protagonists of *Survivor* and *Omon Ra* want to escape such a paradigm – the world aggressively defined by broader geopolitical tensions and national myths. Both protagonists are trying to (re)discover what it means to be a human – within the context of a family, of a community, of a nation, of a myth, within the context of our mortality, biology, of one's gender, and of one's understanding of self. Both Tender and Omon have the task of decoding and reprogramming themselves from a predetermined space within the class and totalitarian system. Their journey represents a challenge to the postmodernity of human experience, a push towards a new understanding of individuality in an era seeking to redefine what it means to be human.

On this journey, they initially seem devoid of any emotion and active agency, lost in the apathy.

"Washing dishes, forever.

Polishing silver, forever.

Mowing the lawn.

Repeat."[388]

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[388] Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor*, London: Vintage, 2000 (first published in 1999), p. 192, (please note that the pagination of this novel is numbered backwards, starting from the page 289).

On the surface, they appear to be suffering. from what J. G. Ballard defined as The Death of Affect[389] – the diminishing emotional response due to repeated exposure to violence and atrocity, especially through media, leading to a numbing of emotional reactions. Ballard explores how individuals, and by extension society, become desensitized to the point where traditional emotional responses are stifled, rendering them incapable of feeling or expressing appropriate emotions in the face of horrors.

> "But then, I thought, even though we human beings always seem to be meeting each other, and laughing, and slapping each other on the shoulder, and saying goodbye, there's still a certain special dimension into which our consciousness sometimes takes a frightened peep, a dimension in which we also hang quite motionless in a void where there's no up or down, no yesterday or tomorrow, no hope of drawing closer to each other or even exercising our will and changing our fate."[390]

Nevertheless, they both use the narrow window of opportunity to escape the given paradigms. The escape itself cannot be peaceful, it has to be driven by extreme violence either pointed towards the self or towards the break with self and the limiting environment. They follow a full circle of transformation, starting from conformism within the cult and society, the acceptance of their predetermined position, followed by the attack on their bodies, their surrender to the self-annihilation for a greater cause/narrative, and ending with the final transgression from all the above.

> "Transgression carries the limit right to the limit of its being; transgression forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes (perhaps, to be more exact, to recognize itself for the first time), to experience its positive truth in its downward fall?"[391]

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[389] J. G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 1990 (first published in 1970), p. 70.
[390] Victor Pelevin, *Omon Ra,* London: Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 112.
[391] Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression", in: *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews;* Edited with an Introduction by Donald F. Bouchard, translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 34.

With Palahniuk, the transgression is most often triggered by a romance as the haven of the lost man of neoliberal capitalism. With Pelevin, the ambient is harsher and more cynical, with protagonists finding solace in the philosophical distancing from mundane reality. Omon's looking *up* is followed by looking *in*, the challenge of understanding the very idea of self in the world of utter and complete simulacrum. However, both paths end with the transgressive escape, which presents itself as both a rebellion and basic survival impulse, the type of unexpected agency and heroism that is built from the upcycled garbage instead of the illusion of the sparkling stardust.

> "The development of much avant-garde prose has dealt with transgression and taboo, death and textural closure, fragmentation and metafictional self-strangulation. One can discern anger in the narrative voice; violence is constantly being done to the body of the text; we discover narrative rape, defilement and dismemberment, resulting in a prose of self-mutilation. Russian postmodernist prose is a literature of closure and/or fragmentation, which tends to turn in on itself, squeezing the flesh of the text until it disintegrates."[392]

For the hypertrashrealist, navigating the mix of high culture, low culture, virtual reality, and trash, advancing implies not merely recycling but upcycling history, culture, myth, and humanity. This ethos embodies a fundamental refusal to define oneself within the dichotomies of Us and Them, embracing the risk of obscurity or the potential for miraculous survival. Such characters, through their vulnerability and acknowledgment of a "garbage reality," reject the postmodernist approach of reshaping identity from pre-existing molds, which often leads to a diminished self. Instead, opting to upcycle their identity, they embark on a transformative journey to redefine and enhance their personal value and complexity, transgressing the postmodern disintegration of text and hinting at a new narrative that emerges from transcending traditional constructs.

The concluding moments of the novels, as Omon steps onto the metro train and Tender presumably uses the parachute to jump from the plane into his new life,

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[392] Sally Dalton-Brown, "Ludic Nonchalance or Ludicrous Despair? Viktor Pelevin and Russian Postmodernist Prose", in: *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 75, No. 2, London: University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 1997, p. 222.

represent a pivotal departure from the abstracted realm of hyperreality into the tangible, concrete aspects of life – a shift from predestined paths to the potentiality of authentic choice. The subway train emphasizes Omon's departure from a scripted existence. Similarly, the parachute, along with staging his own death to shed his identity, serves the same purpose for Tender. Yet, the presence of the route map in Omon's carriage, as well as Fertility's visions that guided Tender's decisions, serve as subtle reminders of life's inherent and inevitable structure. Thus, the ending of the novels encapsulates the enduring tension between the fatalism of *non-choices* and free will, between charted courses and the possibility of abrupt, self-determined transgression, positioning the protagonists on the cusp of journeys that could either adhere to the mapped guidance or forge a new path into the unknown.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Just as the Fritz Lang's fictional cinematic countdown shaped the reality, so did music. Music was an essential ambassador of globally dominant western pop culture. But, music was also essential in building the Soviet Cosmonaut Myth, carefully planned and broadcast during landmark moments of heroic cosmonaut feats, to build the idea of Soviet Hero and the sacred Soviet Motherland. In his return to the ground after the first successful space flight, Gagarin said that, overwhelmed with emotions, his first impulse was to sing the Dmitri Shosakovich's *The Motherland hears, he Motherland knows.*

> "Shostakovich's setting, a lilting melody with a sleepy accompaniment, lends itself to cosmic appropriation. […] It was the perfect choice for Gagarin: with pertinent lyrics and a cozy tonality, it envelops both singer and listener in a familiar warmth, an earthly respite from the estrangement of space. […] The cosmonaut hero sang the same tunes ordinary citizens had grown up singing."[393]

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[393] Gabrielle Cornish, "Music and the Making of the Cosmonaut Everyman", in: *The Journal of Musicology*, Fall 2019, Vol. 36, No. 4, Oakland: University of California Press, 2019, pp. 464–497.

In *Omon Ra*, Victor Pelevin delivers a poignant critique of music used as propaganda. He crafts a rare moment of human connection between Omon and his colleague Dima, who chooses to listen to Pink Floyd in the spacecraft during the final moments before his impending death. This choice facilitates the first and only sincere exchange between the two comrades. The highly unlikely scenario of a Soviet military operation permitting a Western song to be included in any official capacity serves as a subtle act of subversion. Specifically, the song and album Dima references is *Zabriskie Point*, the soundtrack to Antonioni's film of the same name, which further underscores the rebellious undertone of this interaction. What lies outside of text, just as the Palahniuk's later explanation of the destiny of his protagonist, is what that song has become after. Initially created for a movie, the song *Us and Them*, was turned down by the director, becoming instead part of one of the most acclaimed Pink Floyd albums, *Dark Side of the Moon.*

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394 The album cover of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*. Source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dark_Side_of_the_Moon#/media/File:Dark_Side_of_the_Moon.png

The song *Us and Them* deals with the absurdity of everlasting divisions and conflicts and its pacifist message and echoes the words of Kamanin, in the aftermath of the successful Apollo landing on the Moon, which represented the US victory in the space race.

> "… we saw the bright crescent Moon and for a minute were all silent. We were filled with contradictory feelings: it hurt that not our guys were the first to fly around the Moon, butt at the same time we realized that this fly-around would not have been possible without the flight of the first Sputnik, without the flight of Gagarin, without all the great and valuable things already done by the Soviet people in the exploration of space. We all admired the courage of the American astronauts and silently wished them success."[395]

The lunar theme of the album is a knowing nod to the cold vast space of cold war binarities that we are still yet to escape (if nowhere else, then at least on the Wikipedia *Mammals* page), in which the exploited children are continually promised the glittering stardom, only to be left in the darkest corner of the cold fictional space.

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[395] Hendrickx, Bart, "Space History – The Kamanin Diaries 1967-1968", in: *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society*, Vol. 53, 11-12, London: Soc., 2000, p. 418.

"Increasingly the movement of just one commodity, petroleum provided the mechanism that stabilised, or threatened to disrupt, the democratic order."[396]

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[396] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, London: Verso, 2011, p. 112.

Part IV: The End of the Cold War: The Final Disruption of the 20ᵗʰ Century

With the end of the Cold War, Fukuyama's overly optimistic idea of the "The End of History",[397] ushered in by liberal democracy, lost credibility. The attempt by contemporary Russia to redefine itself after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and transition from communism to a young democracy left both the country and former Soviet states with lasting, damaging consequences. This ultimately led to the rise of Vladimir Putin's autocratic rule, which began in 1999 and continues to the present day. Bill Clinton, the once glorified but controversial U.S. president, who served until 2001, ended his term marked by sex scandals, both in terms of his extramarital affairs and his later revealed connections to Jeffrey Epstein. He was succeeded by another Republican president, George W. Bush, who would go on to formulate the Bush Doctrine, setting the stage for interventionist preemptive wars.

Approaching the 21ˢᵗ century, the entire world was briefly tormented by the fear of the millennium bug, also known as the Y2K bug. This anticipated computer glitch had the potential to affect computer-dependent systems worldwide, as they were programmed to display only the last two digits of the year, which could lead to a calendar reset to the year 1900. Governments worldwide spent approximately 500 billion dollars to upgrade their systems and prevent potential failures in areas such as stock markets, military satellites, nuclear missile systems, and power plants.[398]

While the anticipated millennium bug did not bring about apocalyptic disruption, the 21ˢᵗ century ushered in several unexpected challenges. The dot-com crash in 2000, the 9/11 attack in 2001 leading to the War on Terror, the 2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis, the 2015 migrant crisis, the first climate emergency declaration

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[397] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: The Free Press, A Division of Macmillan, Inc., 1992.

[398] *Was Y2K bug a boost?*, BBC News World Edition, Archived article from the original published on 4ᵗʰ June 2000. Source: https://web.archive.org/web/20040422221434/http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/590932.stm

in 2016, the Panama Papers leak in 2016, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, the ongoing invasion of Ukraine that began in 2022, and the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, are some of the most crucially disruptive moments in contemporary history. Instead of witnessing the *end of history*, we have encountered the repercussions of various economic and political choices made in the previous century.

One common thread linking the 20th and 21st centuries is the persistent and growing fear of a nuclear world war, seen as the ultimate form of disruption. Noam Chomsky, in his book *Interventions*, examines the perilous consequences of global superpowers' interventionism, including the Bush Doctrine and the concept of preemptive wars that have escalated numerous global conflicts. In one of his op-eds within the book, titled *Dr. Strangelove Meets the Age of Terror*, Chomsky draws a parallel to the anti-war 1964 Kubrick film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. This film was created in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, the closest the world came to nuclear war during the Cold War. Chomsky warns that we are once again perilously close to a similar scenario and a point of no return.

> "State terror and other forms of threat and use of force have brought the world very close to the edge of nuclear annihilation. The UN would be wise to heed the call issued by Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein fifty years ago: 'Here, then, is the problem which we present to you, stark and dreadful and inescapable: Shall we put an end to the human race, or shall mankind renounce war?'"[399]

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[399] Noam Chomsky, "Dr. Strangelove Meets the Age of Terror", in *Interventions*, Open Media Series, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2007, pp. 71-72.

A still from *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* by Stanley Kubrick (1964)[400]

The emergence of two novels that brought star status to both Chuck Palahniuk and Victor Pelevin, *Fight Club* (1996) and *Generation P* (1999), is thus of special importance for understanding the subtle shift from postmodernism to the development of hypertrashrealist narratives in the wake of the 21st century. They both addressed the decade of the 1990s in post-Cold-War USA and Russia as a very specific historical void and anticipated the disruptions of the 21st century and the new cultural and geopolitical frame that brought new agonies and problematics of the human condition. For this reason, they are examined in greater detail as seminal texts not only for these two authors but also with regards to a particular development of hypertrashrealism and the disruptive nature of the 21st century as well.

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[400] Source: https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-dr-strangelove-1964

Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*

A Short Summary

In the following sections examining Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, the analysis showcases a postmodern framework, characterized by themes of fragmentation, identity crisis, subversion of traditional narratives, and metafictional commentary on the nature of reality and society. The transition to what is described as hypertrashrealism within this text is recognized and explored as intensification and evolution of these postmodern characteristics. Here's how *Fight Club* presents a shift towards hypertrashrealism in the subsequent sections:

- **Project Mayhem: A Violent Search for the New American Man** delves into into the historical and economic implications of trash, opening doors to the redefinition of subversion, memorization and rehabilitation.

- **Army of Lovers** highlights the futility of violence as a means of disruption, as it employs the very tactics of the inherently violent system it seeks to overthrow. As such, vulnerable to the dictates of messianic figures and corporate strategies, asks for a redefinition of disruption.

- **The Little Man's Subversion** touches upon the state of *non-choices*, and the narrator's shift from passivity to active agency, challenging the inertia inherent in postmodern thought. If focuses on the idea of human trash as an ecologic catalyzer for the cultural confrontation and reevaluation.

- **Violence Never Sleeps, It Only Accelerates** focuses on the rise of Epstein's *minimal religion* as an antidote to the pervasive *moneytheism*, a symptom of rapidly accelerating capitalist culture. This acceleration, a defining feature of hypertrashrealism, brings about a chaotic and volatile reality that fosters an environment ripe for destructive accelerationism. However, it also offers means for redefinition of interpretation and the role of transgression within it.

- **Brainwashed by Pain, Fueled by Gasoline** unveils a realm where disenfranchised individuals, dismissed as trash by a profit-driven economy, are incited to radical action, employing the very elements of their oppression – like

gasoline. It presents the transnational connection with post-Soviet 'oil texts', presenting ecological implications as a growingly important aspect.

- **Future is Female** examines the progression from postmodern skepticism to a hypertrashrealist perspective enriched with feminist insights. By subverting stereotypical gender roles and moving past postmodern detachment, Marla's character ignites a transition towards a rediscovery of genre, more precisely, romance.

Project Mayhem: A Violent Search for the New American Man

Inspiration for Chuck Palahniuk's internationally recognized novel stemmed from his involvement with the Cacophony Society, a nationwide anarchist organization of free spirits with a neo-Dada approach to public cultural interventions. Similar to the secret association in his novel, the Cacophony Society operated through its own chapters in various cities across the United States, engaging in costumed appearances, public pranks, and sometimes even illegal occupation of public spaces. The original organizers of these activities would later establish the Burning Man festival in the Black Rock Desert.

An example of the type of subversive activities the Cacophony Society performed can be illustrated through an event organized by the 'Los Angeles chapter', in which they filled a dozen teddy bears with cement and placed them on toy store shelves. These seemingly harmless yet controversial counter-culture activities aimed to test the boundaries of subversive space and to push the limits of disobedience to the edges of potential confrontation or arrest. Ideologically, they targeted and commented on the contemporary paradigm of consumerism and the constraints faced by individuals in an age of meaningless hyperproduction.

Furthermore, the communal spirit of the Cacophony Society contradicted the prevalent loneliness experienced by individuals trapped in the corporate everyday. Chuck Palahniuk's own experience added a personal dimension to this exploration. On one occasion, he arrived at his office with a black eye, only to discover that not a single person at work would ask him about it. The unusual indifference to a visible change on

his face suggested complete alienation as an accepted and welcomed phenomenon within a professional community. This indifference extended to the political arena as well, highlighting a broader societal numbness.
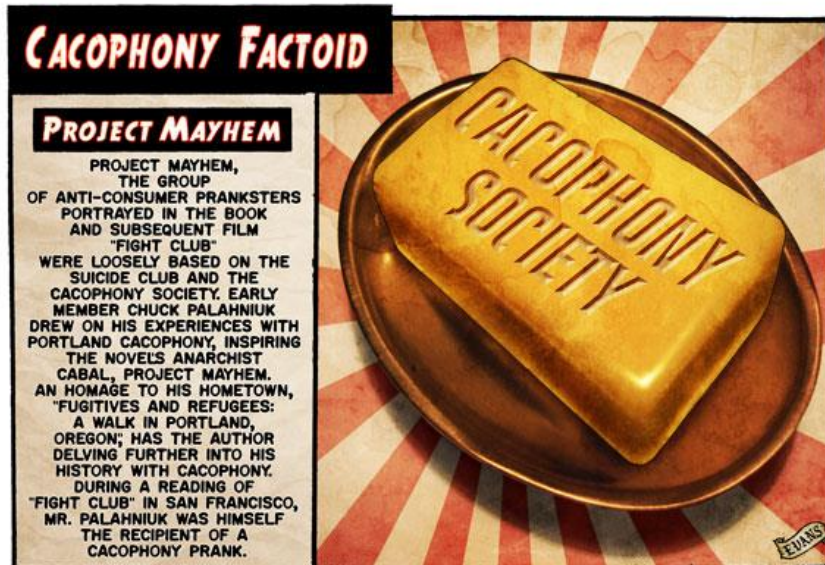
Together with the concept and activities of the Cacophony Society, this unacknowledged black eye ultimately led Chuck Palahniuk to create a fictional secret society of men known as the Fight Club, where physical combat became the catalyst for a new and highly destructive form of rebellion. The novel departed from the more light-hearted nature of the Cacophony Society, delving into the potential darker side of anarchy and subversion, portraying disruption directed both towards *the self* and *the total*, and offering commentary on a society grappling with escalating violence and cult-like leadership.

With an *in media res* beginning, *Fight Club* opens with a nameless American from the late nineties in the 20th century – a random individual, referred to as Jack in the text. He is on the 191st floor of the Parker-Morris building, which is rigged with explosives that are set to destroy it. He has a gun in his mouth, held there by Tyler Durden. The towering height of this skyscraper symbolizes the epicenter of power, representing the United States of America in all its grandeur. The planned anarchist act of Project Mayhem hints at the transgression of an everyman from the clutches of late

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[401] Source: http://www.cacophony.org/

capitalism, consumerism, and emasculation. From such a powerful and cinematic glimpse into the envisioned near-apocalyptic future of the American everyman, the author jumps back and forth throughout the storyline, to unravel and fully present the origin story that led to such a radical climax.

Historically speaking, the novel tells the tale of an American citizen from the Bill Clinton era, undergoing a seductive and unsettling transformation from an ordinary, pacifist white-collar worker to the founder of the extremist organization known as the Fight Club – a desperate attempt to regain some semblance of control.

During Bill Clinton's presidency, hailed as a golden era of the US economy with historically low unemployment rates, the adoption of Keynesian economic policies paved the way to the further widening of the gap between the rich and the poor. It set the country on a course toward an unstoppable, accelerating logic of free-market neoliberal capitalism. Although the novel is set during the time of the so-called 'Goldilock economy,' it serves as a pulsating and ominous signal of what is yet to come, bursting forth to dominate the overall sentiment in the US, within the expanding landscape of corporate culture.

> "The collapse of empire and the growing hegemony of the United States created a new order, consolidated first by the League of Nations and then by the UN, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, in which the world was rendered in the form of separate nation-states, with each state marking the boundary of o distinct economy. […] The framing of Keynesian national economy was part of a programme to limit and reduce the operation of market competition, through increased management of finance, trade and migration, and above all through the prevention of a global market in labour. It can thus be seen as a successor to the colonial order – an earlier and much older system of limiting market forces by means of monopoly, managed trade, the control of labour, and political repression, which began to collapse in the interwar period. Seen in this light, the making of 'the economy' should be connected with a parallel development that slowly sought to frame politico-economic relations to exclude the operation of market competition: the development of the large

corporation, including its largest and most powerful variant, the multinational oil corporation."[402]

Through a simple business equation, Jack highlights the moral dilemma that reflects the contemporary US paradigm, where human worth is often reduced to profit and loss, not only commodifying human life, but treating is as an easily disposable waste.

> "If a new car built by my company leaves Chicago traveling west at 60 miles per hour, and the rear differential locks up, and the car crashes and burns with everyone trapped inside, does my company initiate a recall? You take the population of vehicles in the field *(A)* and multiply it by the probable rate of failure *(B)*, then multiply the result by the average cost of an out-of-court settlement *(C)*.
>
> *A* times *B* times *C* equals *X*. This is what it will cost if we don't initiate a recall. If *X* is greater than the cost of a recall, we recall the cars and no one gets hurt. If *X* is less than the cost of a recall, then we don't recall."[403]

In a Hamlet-like state of mind, the protagonist grapples with his own inaction. Burdened by the impotence of his failed political body and the complete devaluation of human life, he becomes an insomniac, unable to rebel against the system. Expanding the scope from the *self* to the *total*, it becomes evident that he represents the entire political body of the United States struggling with the disillusionment with the American Dream, no longer able to deny a new form of slavery beneath the veneer of prosperity – one driven by corporate profit.

> "This is Marxist warfare, class struggle on the page, the crux of Palahniuk's attack. That attack is meant to create an awakening, a dystopian representation of the hassle of modern-day convenience. Palahniuk's stream of mansions with foyers and fireplaces, these ideological symbols of elite disregard for poverty, serve as center stage for Palahniuk's first three novels. Also at center stage, as

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[402] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, London: Verso, 2011, p. 138.
[403] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 30.

well as equally symbolic, are the characters themselves, their bodies portrayed alternately as houses and temples. Palahniuk's people exemplify the debilitating effects of the hegemonic control of capitalism; they demonstrate that control, *show* that control."[404]

Throughout the novel, there are carefully placed textual signals, starting with the deliberate absence of the protagonist's name, as the indicator of his insignificance and powerlessness to further degradation of his constant referring to himself and individuals in general as 'human crap'. To regain the control he craves, the protagonist must rise from a state of absolute irrelevance – a vanishing and trash identity – to the polar opposite, becoming a mesmerizing messianic leader.

This disassociated split in the protagonist's psyche is triggered, deepened, and explored through a kaleidoscopic examination of various "bodies." There's the numbed and powerless political body of a white-collar worker, burdened by the immorality of his work. There's also the absent patriarchal body, representing a fallen God or failed father figure. Finally, there's the corporeal masculine body – a conduit for suppressed aggressive tendencies and a vessel adrift in a society that oscillates between emasculation and heteronormative machismo.

> "Both postmodernism and trauma theory share a view of self as fragmented and discontinuous. Postmodernists posit multiple, conflicting social forces that influence us and undermine notions of a stable and consistent identity. However, in traumatic situations fragmentation can be debilitating. Survivors feel out of control, disconnected from the past, and they adopt destructive or avoidant personality traits and cognition. […] For instance, Palahniuk's protagonists embrace narcissism to avoid painful emotions, and to fill in the gaps characteristic of an ungrounded, underrecognized identity that is driven by a seemingly unfillable emptiness that they fear and avoid."[405]

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[404] Jeffrey A. Sartain, *Sacred and Immoral: On the Writings of Chuck Palahniuk*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, p. 97.
[405] Laurie Vickroy, *Reading Trauma Narratives: The Contemporary Novel and the Psychology of Oppression*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015, p. 157.

However, the nonlinear narrative and fragmented identity, heavily imbued with the notions of crap, trash, human fat and other forms of waste take us a step away from postmodernism. They offerr a chance to first discuss historical implications of trash, particularly in how the novel's approach to memory and identity reflects a broader societal need for memorization and rehabilitation in the face of cultural and environmental decay. Patricia Yaeger's concept of trash[406] as both a repository and transformative agent aligns with the ethos of Project Mayhem, symbolizing how societal rejects and the remnants of consumer culture can preserve and challenge ethnic histories and personal traumas, thereby acting as a form of resistance against marginalization and commodification. Aleida Assmann's exploration[407] of the shifting mediums of cultural memory – from durable texts to ephemeral traces – resonates with examining the Project Mayhem's anarchistic acts as a direct confrontation with the contemporary crisis in memory and identity preservation.

Starting with the *political body*: following an American man during a period after the identity-defining Cold War. Within the gap between the overwhelming decades-long anti-communist narrative and the deeply xenophobic narrative of the "war on terror", a void emerged. The paranoia nurtured during the Cold War couldn't simply disappear; it had to be either deeply suppressed or transformed into a different type of resonating obsession. Within this historical vacuum, there was an overwhelming sense of the absence of a major external enemy, the grand narrative of an external adversary. And precisely within this historical vacuum, the falsities of the system became most prominent and revealed the enemy within: the model of democracy and the economy that gradually started to divide the country from within.

> "Monetary chauvinism - like so many practices of the cold war nation-state - is just plain inefficient. At least since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the millennial "defeat" of Soviet power worldwide, it seems that there is no "out there" for casino capitalism to vanquish, no dialectical other against which to

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[406] Patricia Yaeger, "Trash as Archive, Trash as Enlightenment", in: *Culture and Waste, The Creation and Destruction of Value,* Edited by Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, pp. 103-116.
[407] Aleida Assmann, "Texts, Traces, Trash: The Changing Media of Cultural Memory"*,* in: *Representations*, No. 56, Special Issue: The New Erudition, Autumn 1996, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 123-134.

define or test itself. Such an empire can expand only by intensifying its victory, since there are no new lands to conquer."[408]

The absence of the patriarchal figure, whether a father or God, is a recurring theme in almost all of Chuck Palahniuk's novels and short stories. In this case, the absence of God takes on an additional layer of meaning within the context of a monetary paradigm. The well-known motto of the United States of America, 'In God We Trust,' was adopted in 1956, replacing 'E pluribus unum' (Out of many – one), which had been the de facto motto since the design of the Great Seal of the US in 1776. President Eisenhower's primary motivation for adopting this motto was to provide a powerful counter-myth to the atheism of the communist Soviet Union during the Cold War. Religion was viewed as an attractive feature that could unite Americans as Cold Warriors. By inscribing it on dollar bills, this myth was transferred to the idea of the American nation as the leader of a free and prosperous world. Religion became a part of the political agenda, alongside pop culture and other forms of soft political power. In an environment that emphasized the importance of accumulating wealth, this religious motto foreshadowed the rise of a new religion in the neoliberal world: the monetary God, which would supersede all other gods. It's not surprising, then, that the radicalized protagonist desires to dismantle this failing God, by attacking the capitalist monetary system.

The overarching mentality of the American Dream, promoting individual freedom and power, had to take a new and perverse direction in a world where gods were failing and political impotence prevailed. Such narrative confines physical bodies within a consumerist setting to gyms and body-obsessive behaviors, focused on hypermasculinity and resulting in the pursuit of useless, monolithic body shapes – used for aesthetic and performative purposes rather than functional ones. Consequently, the suppressed political body, confronted with the failing patriarchal body, turns against the physical body. This starts with the protagonist suffering from insomnia-induced self-injury, which escalates into increasingly severe acts of physical self-harm. The

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[408] Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 32.

violent journey of the disillusioned American man commences with self-inflicted violence, gradually expanding from the personal to the political realm, culminating in an absolute violence aimed at disrupting the existing world order at its core.

> "This is corporation as stalker; the male gaze has become the corporate gaze or the governmental gaze. One would think that freedom-loving citizens would revolt at such carceral surveillance, except for one thing: ideology makes people actually crave the carceral."[409]

Due to this painful insomniac awakening, Jack initially makes a desperate attempt to find some form of meaningful catharsis and finds it in the embrace of broken bodies. He begins attending support groups for terminally ill patients, despite not suffering from any of the diseases mentioned. In one of these groups, Jack discovers his comforting and consoling sanctuary in the character of Big Bob.

Big Bob, a member of the testicular cancer support group, serves as a poignant symbol of emasculated America. He's an ex-bodybuilder and steroid user, a gym owner, divorced three times, and estranged from his two children ("The whole how-to program about expanding your chest was practically his invention."[410]). Big Bob developed large breasts due to the hormonal therapy he received after testicle removal. His ultimate downfall mirrors the larger American narrative – he couldn't build a successful marriage, maintain family relationships, or protect his carefully sculpted physicality.

The choice of Big Bob as Jack's therapeutic sanctuary serves as the first indication of the need to deconstruct the prevailing macho ideals of contemporary men. Even the name of the support group in question, "Remaining Men Together," underscores the recognized need for men to seek a solution to their plight through community. In an era marked by heightened individualism in the patriarchal American society, where individuals strive to build their own success and achieve their own version of the American Dream in an increasingly hostile and unforgiving environment, there's a growing demand for communities centered around solidarity

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[409] ibid., p. 93.
[410] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 21.

rather than profit. This simple concept had almost vanished altogether in the wake of the strong anti-communist sentiment during the Cold War. The celebrated age of individualism was intended as an antithesis to the perceived pitfalls of communism, often associated with authoritarian state control.

> "The FBI is expertly trained to sift out the truth of such reports under the laws of our free nation. When Americans handle their suspicions in this way, rather than by gossip and publicity, they are acting in line with American traditions. Exalting young tattlers was a mark of totalitarian societies, but it took the Cold War to include informing among the inventory of 'American traditions', wrote one historian. The tenor of this sullen mood was registered in James Dean's Weltschmerz, Marlon Brando's nose-picking insouciance, Lenny Bruce's verbal violence, early manifestations of what would later become mass protest movements. But these were isolated moments, dark hints which were lost in the clamour of 'official' culture, in the din of Mickey Spillane's hate-filled and corrosive logorrhea, or in the noisy exploits of Captain America, the Marvel comic hero who had switched so easily from battling Nazis to exposing Communists and who now warned: 'Beware, commies, spies, traitors, and foreign agents! Captain America, with all loyal, free men behind him, is looking for you, ready to fight until the last one of you is exposed for the yellow scum you are!'"[411]

The pursuer of the American Dream, the self-proclaimed champion of freedom, prosperity, and happiness, is expected to embody the ideal of a superior individual – a veritable American Superman. This concept inherently excludes those who do not conform to the meticulously sculpted model: the marginalized, the ailing, the challenged, and the non-male. As an imposter in this support group, Jack discovers a community of Men, a tribal sense of belonging, and a way to embrace their emasculated selves. The tears on the chest of Big Bob symbolize the sorrow for those men trapped in their prescribed roles, men who are forbidden to shed tears. The changes that occur

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[411] Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, London: Granta Books, 1999, p. 192.

in the male body, exemplified by Big Bob's transformation, which grotesquely mirrors a distorted female form, are intended to evoke pity for the male predicament on the surface. However, it is precisely these bodies that become the saviors of the fallen.

This therapeutic catharsis is profoundly disrupted by the intrusion of the female principle, embodied by the character of Marla Singer. Once again, this highlights the vulnerability of masculinity in the contemporary context. Confronted by another individual feigning a "broken body" to connect with people, Jack finds himself unable to attain catharsis, and his insomnia swiftly returns. The presence of a woman, especially within the Remaining Men Together, reveals the deception he had been so eager to accept.

> "Somewhere in the one hundred and ninety-one floors under us, the space monkeys in the Mischief Committee of Project Mayhem are running wild, destroying every scrap of history."[412]

> "I know all of this: the gun, the anarchy, the explosion is really about Marla Singer."[413]

Marla Singer, the sole female character in Fight Club, plays a pivotal role in driving the narrative. Her presence exposes the protagonist's catharsis as a facade and a form of escapism, thereby accelerating a rebellion within him. Jack immediately identifies Marla as an impostor, primarily because the support group is intended for people with testicular cancer. While the other group members tolerate her presence, the protagonist seeks to either exclude her from the group or arrange for them to attend separate sessions. The conscious heterosexual male body resists having a female observer and wishes to avoid any romantic or sexual involvement with her. The encounter with Marla Singer acts as a catalyst for the dissociative disorder, an unconscious act of self-violence that splits the protagonist's personality into two distinct parts: one that is conscious, obedient, passive, and suppressed, and another that is transgressive, violent, and active – the macho persona of Tyler Durden, which unleashes all the suppressed forces in a quest for change through destruction.

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[412] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 12.
[413] ibid, p. 14.

> "You wake up at Air Harbor International. […]
>
> You wake up at O'Hara.
>
> You wake up at La Guardia.
>
> You wake up at Logan. […]
>
> You wake up at Dallas. […]
>
> I know this because Tyler knows this."[414]

The role of Marla Singer is crucial as a disruption of the postmodern narrative, catalyzing Jack's transformation. Her influence shifts the story from a postmodern critique of masculine identity to a narrative where the female principle is central to the protagonist's awakening and the story's resolution, thereby redefining subversion. The quest for the new American man, initially seeking help and support, starts with self-deprecation and leads to the exploration of one's violent self. However, this path of violence inevitably results in self-destruction and the radicalization of his followers, underscoring the everyman's inability to overcome the forces of the hegemonic system. The true saviors, offering a helping hand, turn out to be the compassionate broken bodies. Their leading force, despite the dominant patriarchal narrative and futile attempts to overcome it through violence, will actually be – a broken woman.

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #355, Untitled #397* and *Untitled #360*, 2000 [415]

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[414] ibid., p. 25.
[415] Source: https://thelonelyonedotnet.wordpress.com/2012/04/20/cindy-sherman/

Army of Lovers

> "When you travel a lot, you learn to pack the same for every trip. Six white
> shirts. Two black trousers. The bare minimum you need to survive.
> Traveling alarm clock.
> Cordless electric razor.
> Toothbrush.
> Six pair underwear.
> Six pair black socks."[416]

Short, staccato sentences – recognizable trademarks of Chuck Palahniuk's
narrative style – serve another function in *Fight Club*. They reflect the American
everyman's rising militant mentality and isolation. Jack's packing habits foreshadow
the minimalistic uniforms adopted by the radicalized members of Fight Club in their
extremist phase. The soldier-like behavior of Americans – who have traded civic duty
and physical vitality for consumer identity – underscores a pressing need to regain
control. This narrative represents a significant progression toward self-obliteration,
marked by a rejection of personal identity and militant subversion.

> "And I wasn't the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who
> used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with
> their IKEA furniture catalogue."[417]
> "… the things you used to own, now they own you."[418]

By infusing the IKEA catalog with erotic significance, Palahniuk critiques a
global consumerist society that has supplanted essential human impulses, like
sexuality, with the compulsion to purchase. This portrayal suggests that consumerism's
harm transcends class boundaries, deeply penetrating human nature to exploit primal
instincts for the sake of profit.

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[416] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 41.
[417] ibid., p. 43.
[418] ibid., p. 44.

"On the dresser, there's a dildo made of the same soft ink plastic as a million Barbie dolls, and for a moment, Tyler can picture millions of baby dolls and Barbie dolls and dildos injection-molded and coming off the same assembly line in Taiwan."[419]

The assault on Jack's apartment, a bastion of consumerism, symbolizes the initial strike against a distorted *self*. This act heralds a progressive escalation, culminating in an onslaught against the societal 'house' – the American order and its monetary system. Though these targets differ vastly in their scale of intended deconstruction, both are motivated by a common impulse: a rebellion against the perversion that 'home' has come to represent. The asceticism of Jack's renunciation is akin to a religious act, highlighting the cult-like essence of Project Mayhem and Fight Club. By repudiating the emblems of his white American privilege, Jack strives for a life imbued with meaning beyond the confines of fear and loneliness. Stripping oneself of material possessions and, more crucially, of identity, one is left with nothing to lose and, thus, nothing to fear.

"Maybe self-improvement is not the answer. Tyler never knew his father. Maybe self-destruction is the answer."[420]

To transition into this new realm, Jack taps into his alter ego, Tyler Durden, who embodies the capability for such radical transformation. Following the destruction of his high-rise condominium, Jack encounters Tyler, who guides him from the metaphorical *American house* to a literal *house of subversion*: the nascent cult's headquarters on Paper Street.

"Palahniuk's satire attacks family ISA 'house' symbolism and its broader counterpart of all-encompassing capitalistic 'corporate house' symbolism, but it also aims at products that fill these houses, the output of these corporations, specifically their commodities. Traditionally thought of as helping ease life's burdens, in Palahniuk's fiction products themselves are actually weapons.

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[419] ibid., p. 61.
[420] ibid., p. 49.

Suicides occur with and by the aid of capitalistic product. For Palahniuk the technology of capitalism is demonstrably object-bondage, tied to alienation, and this manifests in suicide using capitalistic object, death from labor-separated object."[421]

Tyler stipulates that Jack must engage in acts of self-violence as a prerequisite for a different life, exemplified by the request, "I want you to hit me as hard as you can."[422] In this manner, Fight Club emerges as an evolved form of self-destruction, akin to how insomnia represents a bodily rejection of an intolerable reality. The protagonist's intense desire to destroy himself, to dismantle the archetype of the American success story, spirals into embracing anarchistic ideas aimed at worldwide upheaval. Tyler Durden's escalating militarism and his dominion over their shared body lead Jack to a state of complete detachment from reality. To curb the destructive impulse and prevent wider harm, Jack shoots himself, a desperate act to extinguish the internal and external chaos. The bullet shatters his face, eradicating a key aspect of his identity – the body as a personal asset. This act, verging on self-sacrifice, ostensibly eradicates Tyler, yet Tyler's influence lingers, as evidenced by the widespread presence of his followers – the disciples of the Fight Club's doctrine.

> "The first rule about fight club is you don't talk about fight club.
> The second rule about fight club is you don't talk about fight club."[423]

The underlying philosophy of Fight Club mirrors that of a cult, marked by its repetitive mantras, entrenched hierarchy, and ritualistic fights that provide a cathartic outlet for pent-up rage. This theme of a disillusioned generation is also a central motif in Victor Pelevin's *Generation P*, highlighting a pervasive sense of aimlessness. Tyler Durden, with his magnetic charm and rhetoric that resonates with his generation, epitomizes the archetype of a messianic leader.

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[421] Jeffrey A. Sartain, *Sacred and Immoral: On the Writings of Chuck Palahniuk,* Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, p. 91.
[422] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 46.
[423] ibid., p. 48.

> "According to Putnam, the rampant individualism of the 1990s had harmed Generation X more than older cohorts. It promoted 'social isolation' and led to higher rates of depression and suicide. Whereas the preceding community-oriented generations had counted on the family, the church, the neighbourhood or clubs to provide support in moments of crisis, modern Americans found no such buffer. Hence, their feelings of helplessness and failure tended to be amplified and could easily turn into 'hopelessness and despair'." [424]

The absurdity of the Fight Club's secrecy, as dictated by its first two rules – which are essentially the same – becomes evident as the club continues to grow, defying the very tenets meant to ensure its confidentiality. This contradiction illustrates the fluctuating demands for absolute obedience and rebellion placed upon the members. The club's rules provoke disobedience by their nature, challenging members to simultaneously uphold and disregard them. Palahniuk delves deeper, juxtaposing the American male's desire for communal belonging against the backdrop of the cult movements that surged from the late sixties. Cults demand the surrender of individuality to a cause, enticing followers with the promise of self-liberation under a charismatic leader and the prospect of leading society down a new, ostensibly improved path. Yet, paralleling the fates of many who fall prey to such dangerous cults, Jack's journey of self-destruction highlights the futility of these extremist ideologies.

In the narrative's microcosm, the theme of deconstruction is further emphasized through a distinctive narrative technique: the use of the corporal *pars pro toto*, reminiscent of the idiomatic expressions often found in 'Reader's Digest.' This approach serves as a microcosm for the larger fragmentation seen in the novel.

> "I found stacks and stacks of *Reader's Digest* in the basement and now there's a pile of *Reader's Digest* in every room. Life in These United States. Laughter Is the Best Medicine. Stacks of magazines are about the only furniture.
>
> In the oldest magazines, there's a series of articles where organs in the human body talk about themselves in the first person: I am Jane's Uterus.

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[424] Ana Sobral, *Opting Out: Deviance and Generational Identities in American Post-War Cult Fiction*, New York: Brill, 2012, p. 232.

I am Joe's Prostate."[425]

Jack's habit of personifying his emotions through various organs, as narrated in the first person, becomes a recurring device. Each body part, symbolizing an isolated emotion, becomes the spokesperson for his rage, vulnerability, rejection, fear, and more. The intensity of these emotions is such that Jack fully embodies them, becoming an almost out-of-body observer (e.g., 'I am Jack's feeling of rejection; I am Jack's boiling anger'). This dissociative emotional processing aligns with his struggle to confront the full range of his feelings, spanning from romantic love and desire to loneliness, despair, and anxiety.

Within the overarching theme of *house* in *Fight Club*, Marla Singer's residence in the dilapidated Regent Hotel parallels her transient, tourist-like approach to existence. Teetering on the brink of suicide, she is acutely conscious of her dislocation in contemporary society, yet unlike Jack, she actively seeks connection and support. Marla's attendance at support groups for men not only emphasizes her isolation but also her search for community in a male-centric world. The raw loneliness that Jack and Marla exhibit betrays a profound disorientation in their adult lives, reminiscent of *lost children* (or *loveless children*, as explored in Part III of this thesis). Despite this, Marla's actions suggest a more proactive stance; her attempt to overdose is a desperate plea for intervention. Her journey can be seen as an unorthodox quest for self-actualization, in stark contrast to the self-destructive path chosen by the male characters.

> "This is why I loved the support groups so much, if people thought you were dying, they gave you your full attention. [...] People listened instead of just waiting for their turn to speak."[426]

Marla exhibits courage in acknowledging her real struggles, making her plea for help an authentic one. Yet, it is not Jack but Tyler who responds to this plea, revealing how even the role of a 'savior' is cast within the violent, male domain. This entanglement forms a complex trichotomy among Jack, Marla, and Tyler, where

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[425] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 58.
[426] ibid., p. 107.

Marla's interactions with Jack and Jack's alter-ego create a cyclical pattern of punishment and reward. Tyler's actions toward Marla—ranging from rescue to disdain—unveil a deep masochistic vein in her that resonates with Tyler's sadistic impulses.

"Marla said she wanted to have Tyler's abortion."[427]

The narrative's transgressive nature starkly depicts the distortion of traditional male-female dynamics, mirroring the flaws of the prevailing social and political landscape. Marla's self-inflicted wounds, such as cigarette burns, symbolize a disturbing quest for love and affection within a context where such destructive behaviors are normalized. Jack's interactions with Marla echo the dysfunctional relationship of his parents, with Tyler Durden acting as a surrogate father figure exhibiting contempt. This projection leads to a communication breakdown where Jack and Marla connect only through aggressive sexual encounters. The stark contrast between Jack's denial of his feelings for Marla and Tyler's hypermasculine demeanor highlights the existential crisis facing many modern men, who struggle to navigate between these extremes.

The capitalist credo asserts that individuals are solely accountable for their success and happiness, emphasizing personal responsibility as the cornerstone of achieving the American Dream. According to this ideology, if one fails to thrive within society, the blame is placed on the individual rather than the systemic structure, leading to self-punishment. This ideological shift from collective to personal responsibility also transfers the burden, weighing heavily on the individual.

> "The impact of the new economy on American society and culture was regarded by many observers as predominantly negative. Focusing essentially on the blue-collar sector, the feminist Susan Faludi suggested that financial insecurity and unemployment had let to a 'masculinity crisis'. Many American men who had previously worked in productive activities 'from shipyard to space' technology had either lost their jobs or had been relegated to 'consumer assistance' at call centres. These men were insecure and alienated because they could no longer

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[427] ibid., p. 59.

perform their traditional roles as family providers and as useful members of society. Simultaneously, a burgeoning culture of 'celebrity' had reduced the experience of masculinity to appearances and the glorification of personal success. For Faludi, the myth of masculinity as self-sufficiency, inherited from the pioneer days, only enhanced the frustration of modern American Men. Instead of 'collectively confronting brutalizing forces', they were repeatedly urged to overcome their difficulties individually. Their failure fomented rage and violence.

In the meantime, middle-class Americans faced a more competitive job market that involved greater financial sacrifices without the guarantee of success."[428]

Confronted with Marla Singer and his tumultuous emotions towards her, Jack's dissociation from Tyler Durden deepens. Tyler evolves into a militant leader, intent on assembling an army of followers under a distorted banner of anarchism. This appealing but dangerous portrayal of the movement has led to a common misreading of *Fight Club,* subsequently co-opted by individuals with extremist views. Rather than endorsing anarchic liberation, the narrative vividly portrays the protagonist's psychological collapse and the perils of cult-like radicalism.

The novel dissects and critiques toxic masculinity, viewing it as a tragic encumbrance that Jack desperately tries to shed through radical self-destruction. His effort to extinguish the violent impulse within proves almost futile; it doesn't eradicate the violence in the world around him but signals the beginning of a struggle. The futility of the envisioned utopian, testosterone-fueled revolution mirrors the disenchantment inherited by a generation that followed the baby boomers.

"Conversely, the failure of the 1960s youth to actually carry out a world revolution has made Xers largely sceptical about their own capacity to effect change. Fight Club therefore also questions and even mocks the values of the 1960s by presenting its own alternative version of an Xer counterculture."[429]

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[428] Ana Sobral, *Opting Out: Deviance and Generational Identities in American Post-War Cult Fiction,* New York: Brill, 2012, p. 217.
[429] ibid., pp. 237-238.
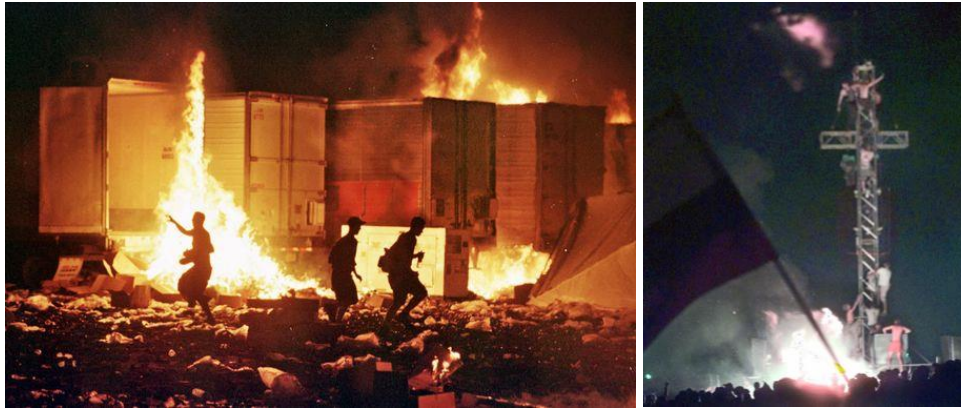
AP Photo/Will Waldron, Dave Duprey, Stephen Chernin

From the archives on the 1999 Woodstock Music Festival, which, in stark contrast to the original Woodstock's pacifist spirit of 1969, ended in audience riots that included fires, the demolition of fences, gang rapes, theft, and other violent incidents.[430]

The novel thus takes the postmodern condition of fragmentation and accelerates it, mirroring the pace at which consumer culture devours individuality and spits out a uniform mass of discontented soldiers in a corporate-like army. The novel's scattered storyline, a mosaic of chaos and order, evolves into a manifesto that critiques the extreme endpoints of our historical and cultural trajectory – where the violent quest for identity becomes as increasingly commodified as the goods we obsessively acquire.

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[430] Source: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/woodstock-99_n_5610534

The Little Man's Subversion

"Tyler's words coming out of my mouth. I used to be such a nice person."[431]

What is the potential for subversion in a world tightly controlled by wealth? What tools does the *little man* have, and what space is there for actions? His power resides in his invisibility and his solidarity with the multitude of *little men* who are the engine of society. They deliver your food, bake your bread, pave your roads – they are the unsung army of the everyday who could disrupt the existing order if they chose to. Their true strength lies in their collective capacity for disruption. The core theme of the novel *Fight Club* – the potential political power of the disenfranchised – prophetically anticipated the emergence of the Occupy Movement.

Established in 2011, a decade and a half after *Fight Club* was published, the Occupy Movement, with its rallying cry 'We are the 99%', sought to highlight and critique the surge in wealth concentration since the 1970s. The movement began as a simple Tumblr blog and, as reported by the media, drew ideological inspiration from economist Joseph Stiglitz's Vanity Fair article, which criticized the wealth disparity in the USA as a direct result of prevailing economic policies.

> "The top 1 percent have the best houses, the best educations, the best doctors, and the best lifestyles, but there is one thing that money doesn't seem to have bought: an understanding that their fate is bound up with how the other 99 percent live. Throughout history, this is something that the top 1 percent eventually do learn. Too late."[432]

Ideas contrasting the '1%' with the '99%' have been explored in theoretical, political, and fictional works for decades, with some of the earliest discussions appearing as far back as 1935. The seismic shifts in American society, triggered by the 2008 financial crisis and the ensuing global Great Recession, led to a spike in unemployment and suicide rates, disrupting the stability of the preceding 'Goldilocks

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[431] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 98.
[432] Joseph Stiglitz, *Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%,* May 2011, Vanity Fair.
Source: https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2011/05/top-one-percent-201105

economy.' The growing public discontent was compounded by these economic hardships. More recently, the perils of such radical thinking have emerged in the form of the QAnon movement, which gained traction during Donald Trump's presidency and culminated in the Capitol riot in early 2021. Although the Occupy Movement and QAnon both exhibit disruptive tendencies, they fundamentally differ in the nature and intent of their actions.

As the middle class, traditionally the backbone of such protests, dwindles, it is compelled to explore new models of disruption and advocate for its rights. It is crucial to revisit the events that both empowered and undermined the effectiveness of the working-class struggle. These shifts in control have often hinged on the prevailing energy resources.

> "Between the 1880s and the interwar decades, workers in the industrialised countries of Europe and North America used their new powers over energy flows to acquire or extend the right to vote and, more importantly, the right to form labour unions, to create political organisations, and to take collective action including strikes. In most cases, these changes enabled mass-based

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[433] A "We Are The 99%" poster created by an Occupy Wall Street group. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We_are_the_99%25#/media/File:Occupy_Wall_Street_Poster.jpg

parties to win power for the first time. Workers also acquired the right to an eight-hour day and to social insurance programmes, including provisions against industrial accidents, sickness and unemployment, as well as to public pensions in retirement. The emergent women's movements fought against the exclusion of women from public political life, sometimes with the support of socialist parties, and gradually forced the granting of voting rights to women. [...]

Workers were gradually connected together not so much by the weak ties of a class culture, collective ideology or political organisation, but by the increasing and highly concentrated quantities of carbon energy they mined, loaded, carried, stoked and put to work. The coordinated acts of interrupting, slowing down or diverting its movement created a decisive political machinery, a new form of collective capability built out of coalmies, railways, power stations, and their operators. More than a mere social movement, this socio-technical agency was put to work for a series of democratic claims whose gradual implementation radically reduced the precariousness of life in industrial societies."[434]

During the industrial age, despite prevalent inequalities, the working class possessed a significant degree of control – similar to what the members of Palahniuk's Fight Club aspire to. Their collective strength was anchored in their ability to cause disruptions and advocate for meaningful changes in labor and social rights. However, the erosion of this valuable collective power can be attributed to a critical shift in the energy sector: the transition to an oil-based system.

The shift to oil extraction, which requires significantly less labor than traditional methods, effectively removed the power of labor unions to enact change through strikes. Control was concentrated in the hands of a few companies that dominated the oil industry, monopolizing the market. These companies could now

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[434] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, London: Verso, 2011, pp. 26, 27.

manipulate oil prices by employing the same strategy previously used by the working class: the deliberate disruption of energy supply.

> "The US funded initiatives to convert Europe's energy system from one based largely on coal to one increasingly dependent on oil. An important goal of the conversion to oil was to permanently weaken the coal miners, whose ability to interrupt the flow of energy had given organised labour the power to demand the improvements to collective life that had democratised Europe. "[435]
>
> […]
>
> "The 'capitalisation of inefficiency' was especially profitable with a commodity such as oil, which was relatively cheap to produce but becoming so vital to industrialised society that great profits could be made if the supply was restricted."[436]

The era of individualism, especially promoted by the American Dream's alluring myth, has contributed to the erosion of collective struggle. The individual, ambitious yet isolated, has been conditioned to seek out and harness new domains of control within themselves and their personal aspirations. Chuck Palahniuk's exploration of the *little men* across various societal segments seeks to reveal potential for renewed collaboration. However, he also highlights the limitations of this approach within a male and media-dominated landscape.

The genesis of Jack's anarchist leanings, reminiscent of his post-college journey to Ireland, warrants examination within the context and timing of its emergence.

> "Guided meditation. You're in Ireland the summer after you left college, and maybe this is where you first wanted anarchy. Years before you met Tyler Durden, before you peed in your first crème anglaise, you learned about little acts of rebellion. In Ireland."[437]

In Ireland, the Blarney Stone, a tourist attraction reputed to endow those who kiss it with exceptional eloquence, presents a peculiar challenge; to do so, one must

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[435] ibid., p. 29.
[436] ibid., p. 40.
[437] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 76.

lean backward over a steep cliff. Jack's act of urinating on the stone signifies his first conscious rebellion, an inaugural expression of his anarchist leanings. This act, situated in another gap – the liminal space between college and the 'real world' – marks a pivotal moment. Jack's literal displacement abroad allows him to introspect about his future in a system increasingly resistant to individual fulfillment. There he is confronted with the reality of what I define as *non-choice*. With limited scope for decision in a market-driven world, young Jack's subversion – rejecting the pursuit of conventional success – is a prelude to his later, more radical actions. Thus, before attacking his own body, before attacking the *house*, what young Jack intuitively attacks is a myth. He refuses to strive for oratory prowess, rejects the pursuit of conformity, and denies the prescribed mythology. His acts of rebellion against consumerism and his physical environment illustrate a desperate search for agency in a world of *non-choices*, which clearly sets him apart from a typical postmodern protagonist.

These early stirrings of dissent burgeon into Tyler Durden's more overt subversions: from contaminating the soups of affluent diners to splicing explicit frames into film reels, culminating in the establishment of Project Mayhem with its aim to upend the financial system. These acts, always highly performative, escalate in intensity alongside Jack's radicalization. In one of his subversive episodes as Tyler Durden, he immerses an inch of his penis into the soup while urinating. The soup is scalding, turning his penis the color of a cooked shrimp. Through such intense and visceral prose, which evokes sharp images, scents, and feelings, the author's intent is not solely to shock but to render the struggles of the average person and their modest means of rebellion as tangible as possible. Just as the act of urinating on the Blarney Stone marked the onset of a new phase for him, so do the later performative acts that seek to challenge the elite, the vain, the affluent, revealing an escalating desire for dismantling the corrupt system.

The vivid landscape of Tyler Durden's 'carnal empire' is filled with the waste of human existence – liposuction fat, urine and blood. The Paper Street Soap Company represents a morbid cycle of turning stolen human fat from liposuction procedures into soap, repurposing consumerism's leftovers and directly originating from 'human trash' into a product meant for purification. This motif expands into a cultural critique,

depicting humanity itself as a pollutant in need of cleansing, reevaluation, and repurposing, and aligns with the ecological implications of trash that spark confrontation and reevaluation. It echoes the insights of theorists like Boris Groys and Gay Hawkins. Groys' exploration[438] challenges traditional notions of value, transforming 'trash' into a medium of cultural critique. Similarly, Hawkins' examination[439] of the moral and ethical dimensions of waste underscores the complex relationship between humans and the refuse they produce, suggesting a profound reevaluation of what we deem valuable or disposable in contemporary society. These perspectives invite a nuanced understanding of 'trash' not merely as the endpoint of consumption but as a significant, transformative component of cultural expression and critique.

Within this framework, Jack's aspiration to 'hit bottom' and embrace the concept of human waste transcends mere self-denigration to become a cornerstone for transformative action. Through these processes, the narrative overcomes the postmodern detachment and evolves into hypertrashrealism, where confrontation and reevaluation are actively pursued.

"Marla's heart looked the way my face was. The crap and the trash of the world. Post-consumer human butt wipe that no one would ever go to the trouble to recycle."[440]

Marla's and Jack's recollections of past health crises culminate in the grim realization: 'This is where you end up when you don't have health insurance.' These may appear as minor details, yet they set the stage for a critique of their existential plight against the backdrop of America's fallible healthcare system. Both recount experiences of inadequate medical services provided to uninsured patients, painting pictures of chaotic, almost surreal hospital environments. These narratives contribute to the pervasive theme of societal neglect, where humans are relegated to the status of

[438] Boris Groys, *On the New,* London: Verso Books, 2014.
[439] Gay Hawkins, "Plastic Bags: Living with Rubbish", in: *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, London: Sage Publications, 2001, pp. 5-23.
[440] ibid., p. 109.

disposable waste. Marla's contemplations on her employment in a mortuary further cements the story in the realm of physical decay.

Enveloped in themes of death, illness, and morbid fascination – from dying cancer patients to sleeping pills, medical burns, and abortion fantasies – Jack and Marla's existential crisis is manifest. Lacking a sense of purpose, they gravitate towards physicality, self-harm, and sexual encounters devoid of true intimacy. They attempt to connect through thoughts of sickness and the certainty of death, incapable of forming a bond through non-violent, conventional means.

> "For traumatic memory to be integrated with normal memory, a patient must undergo a therapeutic 'controlled reliving experience' of traumatic events (J. Herman 182). Palahniuk does not make his protagonist undergo this type of remembering, but he does gradually become aware through others that Tyler is a destructive, dissociated part of himself. Palahniuk signals the narrator's growing awareness through his ambivalent relation to Marla. This begins with disguised memory: the narrator- protagonist thinks he dreams of sex with Marla (which he has actually had), but convinces himself that Tyler is doing it because he cannot yet succumb to this kind of intimacy. 'Marla looks at me as if I'm the one humping her' (68). In calling him out on the black eye 'Tyler' gave her, Marla will make him confront his struggle with memory. He slowly comprehends that for Marla, he and Tyler are the same person and that he is responsible for Tyler's actions."[441]

In the oscillation between political commentary and bodily experience, Jack, battered from his Fight Club bouts, lashes out at work when his boss discovers the club's rules on the copy machine. The ceaseless duplication of the machine parallels the dogmatic repetition of the rules, juxtaposing the cultish nature of both underground movements and corporate life. Jack's defiance seems to break the mold of corporate conformity, propelled by the radicalism seeded by Tyler Durden. Accusing his boss of

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[441] Laurie Vickroy, *Reading Trauma Narratives: The Contemporary Novel and the Psychology of Oppression*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015, p. 167.

exploiting workers for profit and threatening exposure if terminated, Jack's rebellion echoes the quandary faced by whistleblowers.

On the flip side, intimidated by the Tyler Durden within, Jack simultaneously confronts himself. He rebels against both the external pressures and the internal tumult, caught in a web of *non-choices*. Through these outbursts, we ascertain that Jack and Tyler are indeed one and the same; his condominium was destroyed by homemade explosives as the detectives uncover, and Tyler's messianic soliloquies about finding salvation in self-destruction represent the relentless internal forces gaining control.

"I am Joe's Blood-Boiling Rage."[442]

In a desperate attempt to find solace, Jack returns to Remaining Men Together, only to find Big Bob, who has been meanwhile transformed into a Fight Club member. At this juncture, Jack nearly succumbs to the aggressive, masculine, and violent persona within himself. Isolated and adrift, he feels powerless to halt the grandiose schemes Tyler has orchestrated. The loss of Big Bob to Tyler's charismatic influence, coupled with Marla's departure due to Tyler's brutality, signifies Jack's dwindling chances of escaping his unbearable reality through non-violent means.

It seems that the systematic violence within him has followed a very structured path, first targeting his house, then American myths, the paternal figure, and even God, assaulting both his own identity and the feminine aspect. The subsequent onslaught against the entire world order unfolds with nearly the speed of light.

"Envisioning the world as a fragmentary collection of things and events which they control, they never realize that nature operates as a perfect continuum of laws and principles which actually controls them."[443]

Violence Never Sleeps, It Only Accelerates

"Arson. Assault. Mischief and Misinformttion.

No questions. No questions. No excuses and no lies.

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[442] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 96.
[443] Scott Bradfield, *Dreaming Revolution: Transgression in the Development of American Romance*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993, p. 52.

The fifth rule about Project Mayhem is you have to trust Tyler."[444]

The Buddhist-inspired recruitment tactics of Project Mayhem in *Fight Club* underscore a profound engagement with exotic cultures and religion. Amidst the collapse of a functional system, the absence of reason, God, and the father figure, and a lack of a foreseeable future and meaning, the novel exploits the concept of an alternative, Epstein's[445] *minimal religion*, a theme that also resonates in Pelevin's work. This recurring motif of an absent or malevolent paternal presence aligns with Freud's interpretation of monotheistic religion as a substitute for the father figure, as he proposes, "What you have to understand, is your father was your model for God."[446] As explored in Chapter 1, the co-optation of religion during the Cold War within an escalating capitalist framework fused the notion of God with monetary success, lending a quasi-religious fervor to the pursuit of the American Dream. The phrase 'In God We Trust' emblazoned on American currency during this era unambiguously sculpted what I term *moneytheism*. This phenomenon is also observed in the context of post-Soviet Russia.

Project Mayhem's planned attack on the monetary system represents a challenge to the disheartening deity of *moneytheism*. The turn toward Buddhism reflects a narrative parallel indicative of a quest for a new order, new directions, and a new spirituality, as well as a renunciation of the traditional paternal figure. The martial discipline adopted from Buddhist monks is presented as a symbol of the profound cause fueling the escalating violence, underscoring an effort to sever ties with the prevailing socio-political structures.

Men who seek entry into the club undergo a ritual of rejection based on arbitrary attributes – they are deemed too young, too old, too fat, or too 'anything else' that superficially signifies their identity. This test not only gauges their true resolve to join the cult but also serves to strip them of any personal individuality, countering the

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[444] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 125.
[445] Mikhail Epstein, "Minimal Religion", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, p. 165.
[446] ibid., p. 140.

individual-centric narrative of American capitalism and *moneytheism*. The rejection also reflects the dismissals they've experienced from paternal figures, deities, and societal structures, testing their resolve to transcend these denials. While the Paper Street House appears to offer refuge from body shaming, ageism, and class discrimination, it simultaneously erodes individual agency, echoing the inevitability associated with religious fate and the negation of free will. The disciplined 'space monkeys' who maintain the house, manufacture soap from human fat, and carry $500 in their shoes for burial expenses illustrate the hazardous, potentially deadly commitment required of them. Their sole material possession is earmarked for post-mortem ritual, emphasizing that their worth is measured only by their unwavering commitment to a collective cause.

> "Palahniuk's treatment of this topic is not completely uncritical: the irrational fanaticism promoted by Project Mayhem is made visible in the narrator's repeated ironic reference to a 'Tyler dogma'. The thoughts of the messianic leader, which initially seemed like a call to selfempowerment, are swiftly transformed into impositions. Indeed, as Barber notes, the 'jihadist' form of resistance is inextricably connected with the submission of individual interests to the group. Project Mayhem follows this principle by treating all of its members as indistinguishable particles: their only value is their contribution to the higher aim of destroying civilization.
>
> The increasingly militarized nature of Project Mayhem eventually creates a gap between the narrator and his alter ego."[447]

Project Mayhem's radicalism is depicted as a necessary shock to the system for each individual. One random victim of their human sacrifice endeavor is a young man named Raymond K. K. Hessel, targeted to demonstrate to club members that jolting people out of complacency requires extreme actions. In a chilling encounter, the protagonist holds a gun to Raymond's head, demanding to know his true aspirations. Raymond confesses his dream of becoming a veterinarian, prompting the protagonist

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[447] Ana Sobral, *Opting Out: Deviance and Generational Identities in American Post-War Cult Fiction*, New York: Brill, 2012, p. 235.

to command him to return to school to pursue this goal, under threat of death if he fails to comply. This severe method of coercion aims to reawaken the individual's dormant ambitions – not the generic American Dream, but a more personal and satisfying vision. This act symbolizes a ritualistic revival, granting a new lease on life through the terror of existential threat. The intent is for everyone to experience this awakening, as the ever-vigilant Tyler Durden refuses to allow any semblance of slumber. If Project Mayhem had ceased its operations at this point, maintaining its ostensibly noble goal of helping people realize their authentic selves, it might have achieved a form of meaningful subversion. Yet the ultimate goal of a radicalized cult leader drives towards total destruction, overshadowing any potential for benevolent liberation for individuals or society. In doing so, it continues the cycle of political impotence it aims to escape.

Through the avatar of anarchy, Tyler Durden, the prevailing decay is such that those who reject complicity in this system are compelled to seek its total annihilation. This twisted interpretation of social and political accelerationism aligns with Tyler's extreme viewpoint.

"I wanted the whole world to hit bottom."[448]

What began as a journey toward self-destruction has now escalated to the extreme. The radicalization of Jack's character is a historical comment that reflects hypertrashrealism's focus on intensification in the environment of reduced political space, leading toward extremism. It is here that the hypertrashrealism relies on the evolution of Jameson's connection between capitalism and postmodernism towards Nealon's comment on its intensification in the contemporary 'post-postmodern' landscape. As Nealon points out, "intensification" as central to understanding the evolution of capitalism and its influence on contemporary literature.[449]

Guided by the increasingly nihilistic narratives of their messianic leader, the men are relearning how to fight, how to arm themselves, how to push beyond their previous boundaries, to forsake the American Dream, and to commit exclusively to acts of subversion as the only viable route forward.

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[448] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996),, p. 123.
[449] Jeffrey T. Nealon*, Post-postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 26.

"Imagine, when we call a strike and everyone refuses to work until we redistribute the wealth of the world."[450]

The transition from the original Fight Club to the creation of Project Mayhem marks a pivotal shift toward unbridled militarization. Suddenly, we observe the emergence of organized terrorist divisions, such as the Arson Committee, Assault Committee, Mischief Committee, and Misinformation Committee, each specializing in different types of targeted operations. At the heart of these is Project Mayhem, with its central objective to undermine the monetary system. What began as a personal battle escalates swiftly into a political terrorist organization that proliferates throughout the nation and across various domains of influence.

Tyler orchestrates the funding and armament of the Club with clear, methodical steps, escalating its capacity for public disruption. The collective of 'nobodies' and 'everymen' from Remaining Men Together begin to grasp tangibly that they hold the reins of history and possess the power to alter – or indeed, annihilate it – through their subversive and extreme actions. In contrast to conventional revolutionary goals, they adopt the belief that the only significant reform of the system is its complete dismantlement. Their ambitions include a symbolic rejection of elitism and high culture, as they desire to 'wipe their butts with Mona Lisa'; they aim to obliterate the recorded past, symbolized by banking records, and forge a new history that reflects their inner turmoil and desire for unbridled freedom.

> "Issues of concern were multiplying: the exhausting of natural resources; destruction of the environment; the warming of the atmosphere caused by burning fossil fuels; the increasing cost of energy; the devaluation of the dollar; the decline of manufacturing and the end of postwar economic growth; a continuing anti-war movement; conflict in the middle East; and the financial corruption of American politics (including large illegal payments by oil companies), culminating in the Watergate crisis. A prominent political scientist, Samuel Huntington, reflected a common view among the political elite in

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[450] ibid., p. 149.

America when he declared that the country suffered from an 'excess of democracy'."[451]

Project Mayhem, at its core, is a critique of New Accelerationism.[452] Co-opted by ideologues on both the left and right, this radical interpretation of Marxist theory speculates that capitalism will collapse under the weight of its own rampant, entropic growth. The members of Project Mayhem believe that only by annihilating the existing societal structures can any significant transformation occur. They seek vengeance against the manipulations of the American Dream, the exorbitant costs of healthcare, the profound sense of alienation and isolation, the challenges of interpersonal communication, and the erosion of control and self-esteem.

> "Imagine hunting elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center."[453]

For Tyler Durden and his followers, envisioning a utopian future is inextricably linked with the notion of complete annihilation and chaos. Revolted by the Anthropocene era, the insurgent protagonist envisions a world where nature triumphs over a decadent and profoundly malevolent humanity. Reciting Tyler Durden's declarations as if they were mantras, slogans of a revolutionary, or edicts of a cult leader, a member of Project Mayhem seeks purpose in the acts of sacrifice and self-immolation.

> "'Acceleration' is not just a topical political concept but a philosophical category, referring to the global problems of history and eschatology (if the latter is understood as the doctrine of the end of time and the ultimate destiny of the world). We must repeat once more: the march of history from epoch to epoch has accelerated as a whole and has reached, at the end of the twentieth century, unprecedented speed. One year in politics, science, and culture

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[451] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, London: Verso, 2011, p. 194.

[452] Samantha Walther and Andrew McCoy, "US Extremism on Telegram: Fueling Disinformation, Conspiracy Theories, and Accelerationism"*,* in: *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Vienna: Terrorism Research Initiative, 2021, pp. 100-124.

[453] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 150.

contains as many events as would have taken up a century in the past. It would appear that such acceleration gives the lie to the ancient prophecies, according to which the world would come to rest in 'eternity and peace,' and 'these should be time no longer' (*Revelation,* 10:6).

However, history strikes us with its paradox: the immutable, eternal content of culture increases with the rate of acceleration of all changes. While heading in the direction of the future, culture transforms itself into its own past. The new and the old, which accelerate at the same rate, seem to meet and neutralize each other, creating an inert zone in the midst of the acceleration, approaching a zero point in time – the kingdom of the eternal present. The world, which attains extreme speeds, comes to a standstill in mid-flight. If 'rest is the essence of movement' (Lao-tse), then with more movement there abides more rest."[454]

As velocity increases – the speed of consumption, hyperreality, and information – stories hurtle towards thematic and discursive obliteration. The phrase "A criminal is a criminal is a criminal,"[455] a nod to Gertrude Stein, employs a typical postmodernist technique yet reveals the need for the redefinition of hermeneutics in the contemporary literary dialogue. The reflexive criminality in the narrative, mirroring the destructive intent of the group, is fueled by a stark aspect of American life: the liberal policies of gun control laws.

Coupled with the rise in militant men's groups, these factors facilitate the grim realization of accelerationist ambitions. By arming the 'Remaining Men Together' – an echo of how easily radical factions in the US can arm themselves and form paramilitary units – Tyler channels the group's destructive potential.

"All a gun does is focus an explosion in one direction." [456]

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[454] Mikhail Epstein, "The Paradox of Acceleration", Mikhail Epstein, in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, pp. 180, 181.
[455] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 142.
[456] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 149.

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Houston Gun Show at the George R. Brown Convention Center

The collective frustration and rage of these disillusioned men find a conduit, bringing them a step nearer to collective ruin. But the essence of transgression within this narrative does not merely rest in the overt acts of violence, nor in the chaos they engender. True transgression lies not in the plainly transgressive elements of the plot but in the narrative's capacity to transcend from a state of permanent chaos into a leveling phase. This transition sets the stage for a meaningful change, proposing that the pathway out of nihilism isn't through further destruction but through the societal reconstruction and subversion that will occupy the feminist stance. This perspective underscores a critical reassessment of the value of chaos within the story, suggesting that chaos itself is not the end goal but a catalyst for achieving a more profound, systemic transformation.

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457 Source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gun_culture_in_the_United_States#/media/File:Houston_Gun_Show_at_the_George_R._Brown_Convention_Center.jpg

Brainwashed by Pain, Fueled by Gasoline

The quintessential mantra of the Fight Club is encapsulated in the declaration, "I am the all singing, all dancing crap of this world."[458] To them, the self is deemed worthless, a toxic byproduct, the waste of a civilization's relentless march toward industrialization. This deep-seated belief that humanity has become a planetary trash, hastening towards absolute turmoil and ruin, serves as a dire clarion call that jolts the everyman – a prototypical American Jack – into a state of awakening. The trope of trash in literal, cultural and human form as the reconstructive element marks the most obvious and important transition from postmodernism to hypertrashreality.

> "The predominance of extremely deprecating expressions in Fight Club to describe the characters (examples include: 'trash', 'crap' and 'human butt-wipe') amplify their marginalized position. Simultaneoulsy it raises questions about the viability of a society that seriously devalues human life to the point of making people feel like waste. Tyler's speech articulates the discontent of all of the people who have been, or who fear to be, discarded by a socio-economic system that systematically eliminates jobs and basic securities in order to secure profits."[459]

Let us recall Jack's self-disdain, situated in a Hamletian moral dilemma, stirred by the unethical nature of his occupation and his pervasive sense of worthlessness, which leaves him powerless to resist. This passive self-abhorrence culminates in torturous insomnia. It is here we encounter the novel's paradoxical epiphany – the startling revelation that Tyler Durden is none other than Jack himself, and vice versa. What was once a desperate longing for sleep morphs into fear; for in slumber, the most extreme version of himself emerges. It's during these unconscious hours that the protagonist unwittingly establishes a cult, galvanizing a legion of adrift men who are now shearing their hair and scarring their skin with lye – a caustic substance used for

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[458] ibid., p. 169.
[459] Ana Sobral, *Opting Out: Deviance and Generational Identities in American Post-War Cult Fiction*, New York: Brill, 2012, p. 228.

soap-making and unclogging drains, capable of severe burns. This ritual serves as a symbolic shedding of their identities, which they now view as adversaries. They seek to erase their personal histories, yearning to be an anonymous force that will reboot the world to its original setting. The inner dialogue – a confrontation between Tyler and Jack – becomes a tangible struggle for dominion over their *body* ("We both use the same body, but at different times."[460])

Jack's comprehension of true wakefulness must undergo a stark reevaluation in light of the grandiose 'awakening' championed by his destructive alter ego. By the time the truth dawns, a web of Project Mayhem cells has already been woven across the nation, with outposts in Seattle, Los Angeles, Detroit, Washington D.C., New York, and Chicago. "In a hundred cities, FC goes without me."[461] he acknowledges, recognizing that the network's expansion occurred *during Jack's sleep*. The political radicalization and anti-conformist rebellion, alongside the ideology fueling Tyler Durden's orchestrated acts, unravel before Jack, triggering an urgent sense of responsibility to halt the pandemonium he unwittingly authored. Gripped by a near-panic-attack, he is compelled to untangle his life's narrative, grappling with the reality of his dual existence. This involves reassessing his tangled interactions with Marla, acknowledging the deference of Fight Club members nationwide, and confronting the series of events now unalterably in progress.

Through a narrative threaded with chemical concoctions and recipes for anarchy, one stands out: a detailed exposition on crafting napalm, symbolizing the immense potential for destruction.

> "'One, you can mix equal parts of gasoline and frozen orange juice concentrate,' the space monkey in the basement reads. 'Two, you can mix equal parts of gasoline and diet cola. Three, you can dissolve crumbled cat litter in gasoline until the mixture is thick.'"[462]

At the heart of these dynamics is the pivotal role of gasoline – all three napalm recipes require it. This connects back to the historical transition from coal to gas as the

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[460] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 164.
[461] ibid., p. 180.
[462] ibid., p. 170.

primary energy source and its repercussions on labor movements and environmental conditions, as encapsulated by Timothy Mitchell's concept of *carbon democracy*.[463] In an era where there's a push towards renewable energy, American society appears teetering on the edge of collapse, fueled by firearms and fossil fuels. These ecological perspectives inevitably permeates the realm of literature. As will be examined later, in the context of Ilya Kalinin's concept of 'oil texts,' referred to as *Petropoetics*,[464] this phenomenon is also reflected in the developments in the post-Soviet literary scene.

The atmosphere, both ecological and psychological, is tainted; the widening chasm between affluence and poverty, the erosion of purpose and rationality, continues to charge the radicalism that lures those who perceive they have nothing to lose. the visceral and destructive elements of such a reality are a response to systemic failures.

> "'We are the middle children of history, raised by television to believe that someday we'll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won't. And we're just learning this fact,' Tyler said. 'So don't fuck with us.'"[465]

The United States' gun policy ignites an ongoing and intense debate both domestically and internationally. The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which enshrines the right to keep and bear arms, is fervently both defended and opposed across the political spectrum. It appears that America, particularly in the era of Fight Club, is increasingly grappling with the fallout from such legislation. A poignant illustration of the resulting violence is the Columbine High School massacre, which occurred in 1999, just three years after the novel's publication. This tragic event unfolded at Columbine High School in Columbine, Colorado, where senior students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold executed a deadly school shooting and attempted bombing. They killed one teacher and twelve of their peers, wounded 21 others, and ultimately took their own lives in the school library. At the time, it was the most lethal high school shooting in U.S. history and has since influenced other similar incidents

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[463] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, London: Verso, 2011.
[464] Ilya Kalinin, "Petropoetics", Translated by Jesse M. Savage, in: *Russian Literature since 1991*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 120-144.
[465] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 166.

globally. The term 'Columbine' has become almost synonymous with school shootings. Notably, the attackers also used homemade explosives, strategically placed around the school, mirroring the destructive methods explored in *Fight Club*.

The significance of such tragic events as the Columbine massacre within the context of American culture and society lies in their revelation of terrorism and destruction as not merely external threats but manifestations of systemic failures. With the Cold War in the rearview and the impending War on Terror, which would predominantly focus on Muslim terrorist organizations and extremist groups, Chuck Palahniuk's narrative underscores the notion of homegrown terrorism, fostered by the systemic deceits of society itself.

Eric Harris (left) and Dylan Klebold in the cafeteria, 8–11 minutes before their suicides[466]

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[466] Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columbine_High_School_massacre

Jack's jarring epiphany – that he is, in fact, the enemy, the agent of destruction within a culture of hypertrash – is a recognition that crystallizes in this historical and political interlude. The quest for peace and stability is thus reframed as an internal struggle, a battle with the self.

"Whereas the Unabomber opposed technology in general, other terrorists embraced more sectarian causes. The deadliest act of terrorism within the United States prior to the 9/11 attacks was perpetrated by a 27-year-old extremist patriot. On April 19th in 1995, the Army veteran Timothy McVeigh bombed an office building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people. His attack was aimed at the FBI employees working in the building. McVeigh sympathized with the far-right and was convinced that the federal government was tyrannical and anti-constitutional. An influential analysis of the rise of sectarianism and terrorism in the late twentieth century was provided by Benjamin R. Barber's *Jihad vs. McWorld (1995),* which suggested that globalization had produced two opposing outlooks. The new economy fostered the elimination of frontiers, national identities and local traditions in order to create a homogenous global market. Barber dubbed this trend 'McWorld'. The bonds of family, community or religion were replaced by an aggressive and superficial form of consumerism, symbolized by shopping malls, fast food and MTV. In response to these developments, separatist movements sought to redraw boundaries and to challenge the authority of national states. Due to their hostile nature, they were dubbed 'Jihad'."[467]

Jack experienced the loss of the man who was the closest thing to a friend that he had. Big Bob, also known as Robert Paulson, died at the age of 48 during one of Project Mayhem's missions. He was shot by the police because he refused to be arrested, knowing that this would lead to his expulsion from Fight Club. Big Bob chose death over losing his membership, emphasizing the importance of belonging.

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[467] Ana Sobral, *Opting Out: Deviance and Generational Identities in American Post-War Cult Fiction*, New York: Brill, 2012, p. 219.

Jack's unsuccessful attempted suicide, through which he tries to rid himself of Tyler Durden, feels like another inevitable *non-choice*. As the battle between Tyler and Jack rages on within his own body, the body itself has to be destroyed or damaged. The battle with oneself also implies a great deal of sacrifice for Jack. To lose Tyler is to lose his charisma, the alpha male allure, the power to lead an army, and be a messianic leader. To lose Tyler is also to lose independence and rebellion, the power to lead and strive for freedom. All these drives, which were stifled in the everyman, in the domesticated male, in the defeated man, are now revealed for what they are: distracting embellishments on a path that clearly leads to extremism. With Bob's death, Jack sees clearly that Fight Club is not at all different from the corporation he works for. Through Project Mayhem, individual life has no meaning, it is as cheap and disposable trash as it is for corporations.

The climactic fight, emblematic of the American everyman's dread at the century's end, echoes the novel's initial conflict, reverberating back to Jack's first 'physical' with Tyler – his alter ego – in front of the bar, embodying a visceral battle against self. This pivotal confrontation transcends a mere struggle, signifying resistance to the allure of extremism, an insidious form of political impotence. In their final confrontation, Tyler Durden commands an army of devoted space monkeys, while Jack stands with a solitary ally – a woman. This stark contrast not only lays bare the imbalance of power but also resonates with Martha Albertson Fineman's assertion[468] that vulnerability is a fundamental, universal human trait, one that ought to inform the bedrock of our social policies and legal frameworks rather than be relegated to marginalized identities. It is this recognition of shared vulnerability that illuminates the transformative influence of feminine wisdom and resilience, positing that true fortitude and the path to resolution is found not in the multitude or in aggression, but in the deep recognition and embracing of our collective vulnerabilities.

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[468] Martha Albertson Fineman, *The Autonomy Myth, A Theory of Dependency*, New York: The New Press, 2005.

Future is Female

Pipilotti Rist, Open My Glade (Flatten) (still), 2000, taken from the single-channel video installation, silent, color[469]

A still from a video work by Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist serves as a recognizable representation of the entire piece, displayed on electronic billboards in Times Square, New York, nightly from 11:57 to midnight. Disrupting Times Square's advertising frenzy, Rist presses her face against the glass, as if attempting to escape a trap. Her transgressive device raises questions about the invisible boundaries imposed on women, creating a powerful interplay between the screen and the space beyond. It is a messy and disturbing attempt to distort the canonized image of the objectified female body and face.

> "On the day that sexuality began to speak and to be spoken, language no longer served as a veil for the infinite; and in the thickness it acquired on that day, we

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[469] https://www.artsy.net/artwork/pipilotti-rist-open-my-glade-flatten-still

now experience finitude and being. In its dark domain, we now encounter the absence of God, our death, limits, and their transgression."[470]

From Bob's death to Jack's attempt to prevent his boss's demise, Jack chooses self-sacrifice to rescue the world from his destructive tendencies. A crucial and often overlooked question arises: Is the entire novel a form of ritual exorcism aimed at purging the protagonist's distorted masculinity?

"Up here, in the miles of night between the stars and the Earth, I feel just like one of those space animals.

Dogs.

Monkeys.

Men.

You just do your little job. Pull a lever. Push a button. You don't really understand any of it.

The world is going crazy. My boss is dead. My home is gone. My job is gone.

And I'm responsible for it all.

There's nothing left.

I'm overdrawn at the bank.

Step over the edge.

The police tape flutters between me and oblivion.

Step over the edge. What else is there?

Step over the edge.

There's Marla.

Jump over the edge.

There's Marla, and she's in the middle of everything and doesn't know it.

And she loves you.

She loves Tyler.

She doesn't know the difference.

[470] Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression", in: *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews;* Edited with an Introduction by Donald F. Bouchard, translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 51.

Somebody has to tell her. Get out. Get out. Get out. Save yourself."[471]

In this crucial internal monologue, we witness a significant step towards dismantling ingrained patriarchy. The female principle, once seen as the primary source of dissatisfaction, is now recognized as essential and worth preserving. However, the notion of a male savior still stems from patriarchal dogma. The *damsel in distress* represents an archaic approach to problem-solving. Ultimately, a reversal will occur, with Marla's character assuming the savior role. This transformation will deconstruct traditional genre conventions and redefine the very concept of salvation itself.

In this hypertrashrealist narrative, feminist insights are not just add-ons but fundamental building blocks that challenge and reshape our understanding of characters and their interactions. Marla embodies the ideal of disrupting and redefining the narrative landscape, challenging the postmodern detachment. She appears to be the force that lays bare Jack's vulnerabilities. She exposes him not only as an imposter among the group of testicular cancer patients, lacking a history of the illness, but also reveals the extent of his fears and his inability to connect with her beyond the framework of adopted violent male models. Jack's awakening to his own sexual desires has also awakened a darker impulse within him – the drive towards self-destruction. His fear of love, loss, decay, entropy, and the inevitable end of all things demanded a defense mechanism that could provide affirmation through destruction.

> "The female protagonist's disturbing presence in the narrator's support groups actually inspires him to look for alternative ways of dealing with his discontent. Although he does not recognize it, Marla provides the very model of nonconformity he will gradually adopt. As such, the female deviant is the actual trigger for the narrator's deviance. This point has been largely overlooked by the analyses of the novel as well as of the film Fight Club, which have tended to focus on the dynamic relationship between the narrator and his alter ego Tyler Durden. Without Marla, however, there would be no Tyler."[472]

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[471] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 193.
[472] Ana Sobral, *Opting Out: Deviance and Generational Identities in American Post-War Cult Fiction*, New York: Brill, 2012, p. 224.

From a psychological perspective, there is a significant amount of transference happening within the male individual. The pent-up dissatisfaction, anger, vulnerability, and powerlessness that Jack feels when the female principle enters his comfort zone are reflections of his emotions towards both his homeland and women in general. Marla becomes the catalyst for the emergence of Tyler as a destructive defense mechanism, representing not only Jack's struggle but also her own battle with internalized misogyny and the broader corruption within society.

> "Tyler articulates their anger at the false promises of the society and leads the others in collective resistance. However, Tyler is depicted as a fantasy figure, physically perfect, whose dangerous, callous masculinity is featured in advertising that offers men an illusion of control and women glamorized threats of violence. The rough sex he has with Marla as Tyler underscores this dissociated, mediated intimacy that seems to transcend inhibition and shame but does not accomplish the real emotional intimacy and friendship that the narrator needs but fears. He seeks refuge in media-driven images of masculinity that shun vulnerability and full humanity and mask why he has difficulty accepting Marla's love: she is like him, and he hates himself.
>
> The narrator's focus on his own body becomes the concrete manifestation of his identity, an externalization of his psychological issues, and a platform for agency and control for his defensive personality."[473]

The impotence here is not physical but emotional, and it results from the overall political impotence. Consequently, the role of the savior undergoes a transformation. It is Marla, along with her group of individuals afflicted by various ailments – testicular cancer, bowel cancer, brain parasites, melanoma, tuberculosis – those who have accepted the body's failures and made peace with them, who come to Jack's rescue.

Marla appears messy and damaged, with smeared makeup, constantly struggling to break free from the confines of various spaces – her hotel room, her female identity, and her loneliness following her near-suicidal experience. In many

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[473] Laurie Vickroy, *Reading Trauma Narratives: The Contemporary Novel and the Psychology of Oppression*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015, pp. 165, 166.

ways, she resembles Pipilotti Rist in this work. She is surrounded by dominant voices and the advertising screens of the prevailing narrative, but during her three minutes of broadcasting time, she disrupts them with her close-up face.

The irony of this army of broken individuals forgiving and saving Jack is different from the cynical path of Vavilen in Pelevin's *Generation P*. But it is equally sentimental and intentionally naïve. Under all the violence and anarchy, it is an obscure yet genuine romance story. It is this awareness of love that compels Jack to pull the trigger to his mouth, successfully killing Tyler. It is this love that pulls him back from the brink of extremism and back to life.

> "Firstly, in spite of the apparent praise of violence, the narrator eventually rejects Tyler and tries to dissolve fight club and Project Mayhem. Secondly, he chooses Marla over the all-male organizations that previously surrounded him. Hence, Faludi concluded that Fight Club actually proposes a collaboration between men and women against the alienating effects of modern consumerism and neoliberalism."[474]

The bullet that passes through Jack's face symbolizes escapism, his means to break free from the prison of Tyler Durden's macho persona. In a sense, this also mirrors Rist's attempt to break free from the screen.

> "The end of Palahniuk's dystopian novel shows the narrator incarcerated in a psychiatric ward, imagining that he is in heaven. There is no doubt left that he is insane. All the revolutionary ideas propounded in the novel are reduced to hallucinatory ramblings. Jesse Kavadlo points out that this is an essential aspect of the "comic irony" of Fight Club: "as attractive as Tyler seems… his philosophies are a fantasy and a delusion.
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> […] Even in 'heaven' he is repeatedly approached by ward assistants with bruises and scars, who remind him that 'Everything's going according to plan.' (199). The ideals of empowerment and control which he personified and promoted live on outside the psychiatric ward."[475]

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[474] Ana Sobral, *Opting Out: Deviance and Generational Identities in American Post-War Cult Fiction*, New York: Brill, 2012, p. 242.
[475] ibid., pp. 236-237.

The ominous ending hints at the inability to prevent the future activities of Fight Club and Project Mayhem, suggesting that Jack is only the first among the men who need saving. This alludes to the idea that the fight to regain control and meaningful dynamics in the contemporary world has only begun. But it underscores the notion that the true protagonists of this fight must be anything but alone and aggressively male.

Under the transgressive surface, we see the emergence of romance as a genre revival, disrupting the typically postmodern approach. Although it is not stripped of nihilism, it nevertheless presents a more active engagement with the realities of our trash existence – confronting its ecological, political, and cultural implications. Through this transformation, the text moves beyond postmodernism's detached stance, engaging directly with the challenges and complexities of contemporary life, thus marking a significant shift towards hypertrashrealism instead.

Victor Pelevin's *Generation P*

A Short Summary

In the following analysis of Viktor Pelevin's *Generation P*, the text scrutinizes the post-Soviet generational shift as a lens to explore the evolution from postmodernism to hypertrashrealism. Tatarsky's journey – set as a video game against the backdrop of societal upheaval – emerges as a quest for identity among the ruins, where the leftovers of a fallen empire are repurposed into the façade of the advertising world. *Generation P* probes the individual's capacity to navigate the remnants of history and current delusions, weaving classic postmodern themes with proactive agency and sentimentality, charting a new course in literary evolution paralleling transformation in Western postmodernism.

- *Non-choices:* **From the Death of the Middle Class, to the Birth of the Post-Soviet Gestalt** examines the trope of *non-choices*, marking the transition from postmodern paralysis to hypertrashrealist active agency. The protagonist's cynicism is tempered by nostalgia for the defunct Soviet paradigm, injecting sentimentality into a typically postmodern narrative.

- **The Myth is Dead, Long Live the Myth** explores the movement from passive cultural participation to active cultural translation under neoliberal influence. Hypertrashrealism transcends postmodern skepticism to embrace a more sincere and pragmatic confrontation and reevaluation of the cultural language.

- **The Algorithm of Ascension** illustrates the transition from postmodernism to hypertrashrealism characterized by the move from postmodern *gamefulness* to the contemporary concept of *gamification*. This shift reflects a deeper societal change where the playful skepticism and irony of postmodernism give way to hypertrashrealism's blending of cultural critique with a gamified approach to reality.

- **The Age of Homo Zapiens** charts a shift from postmodern genre deconstruction to hypertrashrealism's genre revival, where the bildungsroman and adventure novel meet the simulacra of a media-centric reality. It signifies a

move from narrative deconstruction to a lived simulacrum, embodying hypertrashrealism's entwined literary and societal evolution.

- **The Fuel of Petropoetics** encapsulates the core of Kalinin's *Petropoetics*, illustrating its emergence in post-Soviet 'oil texts' that present oil's dominance, together with the prevalence of drugs and alcohol, to forge a new national identity. The section examines the evolution of Baudrillard's concept of the postmodern hyperreal into the concept of hypertrashreal, positioning trash as the core of both new Russian and global reality.

- **In the Realm of *Minimal Religion*** explores the shift from postmodernism to hypertrashrealism within the sphere of spirituality, drawing on Pelevin's rich array of global mythologies to depict Russia's identity crisis. This section highlights the rise of a new, diverse spiritual mosaic, incorporating Mikhail Epstein's concept of *minimal religion* and a broader cultural "hybridization."

- **Rendering the New Cold War** delineates the transition from postmodern fragmentation to a hypertrashrealist order in post-Soviet Russia, where Beumers and Lipovetsky's theory of *communal violence* and Martin McCauley's emphasis on power over ideology in Cold War dynamics frame the narrative.

- **Future Is Golden** captures the evolution from postmodernism to hypertrashrealism, with Pelevin charting the rise of the sentimental antihero amid the debris of Soviet collectivism and the embrace of neoliberal individualism. Ellen Rutten's concept of New Sincerity as a reaction to historical trauma weaves throughout, suggesting a therapeutic turn from purely postmodern irony towards its blending with the curative sincerity.

Non-choices: **From the Death of the Middle Class, to the Birth of the Post-Soviet Gestalt**

Victor Pelevin opens his novel *Generation P* with a humorous yet poignant dedication "To the Memory of the Middle Class," laying the foundation for a narrative that mourns the bygone Soviet era. Following the trend of fashionable generational nomenclature,[476] as a prominent voice among the inaugural post-Soviet generation, he sets forth the very concept of 'Generation P'. Humorously encapsulating what I define as *non-choices* – political and consumerist alike – faced by the citizens of the Soviet and ensuing Russian eras, this generation gives rise to a new Russian identity, as personified by the novel's central character, Babylen Tatarsky.[477]

> "Once upon a time in Russia there really was a carefree, youthful generation that smiled in joy at the summer, the sea and the sun, and chose Pepsi. […] So in fact Generation 'P' had no choice in the matter and children of the Soviet seventies chose Pepsi in precisely the same way as their parents chose Brezhnev."[478]

The Brezhnev-led Soviet Union, seemingly more stable than Khrushchev's tenure, was notably inefficient, corrupt, and technologically lagging behind the fast-evolving West. In the post-Cold War narrative, choosing Pepsi over the globally dominant Coca-Cola symbolizes this lag, highlighting a failure to identify and select the leading option. By paralleling political choices with American brand allegory, Pelevin equates the realms of politics and economics.

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[476] The Generation X is the generation that followed the generation of Baby Boomers and preceded the millennials, and it refers to everyone born between the early 60s and late 70s.
[477] "One might say that the quarter-century history of reworking the Soviet past has become the history of transforming post-Soviet literature into a new Russian literature", Evgeny Dobrenko, "Recycling of the Soviet", in: *Russian Literature since 1991*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 21.
[478] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 1.

Notably, a late 1990s Pepsi commercial humorously echoed 'Generation P' sentiment. Featuring the globally renowned British pop group, Spice Girls, and their lyrics about 'Generation Next', this ad predated Pelevin's novel by a mere two years, underscoring the cultural zeitgeist that both the advertisement and the novel capture.[479]

xolboch 1 year ago
I clearly remember when this appears on tv I was 15!!! Gosh and now I'm 36! We are the generation next wow so happy I live those days

👍 69 👎   REPLY

▼ View 11 replies

Vincent Jance 1 year ago
This is the ultimate dream of every advertisers!

👍 44 👎   REPLY

Charlotte Johnson 10 months ago
THIS is why I prefer Pepsi to Coke. 😉 😂

👍 7 👎   REPLY

Screenshots of YouTube user comments under the above-mentioned music video

For 'Generation P', the post-Soviet paradigm is understandably marked by tectonic social and geopolitical shifts. The collapse of the Soviet Union created a disruption of unprecedented scale, signalling a profound shift not only in their collective narrative, but also resonating as a seismic disturbance across the global stage.

> "Then, quite unobtrusively, an event of fundamental significance for his future occurred. The USSR, which they'd begun to renovate and improve at about the time when Tatarsky decided to change his profession, improved so much that it ceased to exist (if a state is capable of entering nirvana, that's what must have happened in this case); so any more translations from the languages of the peoples of the USSR were quite simply out of the question. It was a blow, but Tatarsky survived it. He still had his work for eternity, and that was enough for him."[480]

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[479] "Move over yeah, don't do it over (yeah yeah yeah), 'Cause it's over yeah yeah yeah (don't do it over), Generation next (ow, yeah yeah, generation next)"; Spice Girls - Pepsi Commercial (1997 Move Over Generation Next Extended). Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sry0XhET3oc
[480] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 3.

Romantically believing that poetry opened a door to 'eternity' for him, Babylen soon faces a sobering revelation. As a translator well-versed in the languages of the now-defunct USSR, he finds both his professional expertise and his pursuit of 'eternity,' which hold no monetary value, to become relics of a bygone era as the Soviet Union crumbles.

> "The feeling had been decoded for him by the words of Marina Tsvetaeva: 'Scattered along the dusty shelves of shops (No one has bought them and no one buys!) My poems, like precious wines, will have their day' […] the eternity he used to believe in could only exist on state subsidies, or else – which is just the same thing – as something forbidden by the state. Worse even than that, it could only exist in the form of the semi-conscious reminiscences of some girl called Maggie from the shoe shop. […] He didn't write any more poems after that: with the collapse of Soviet power they had simply lost their meaning and value."[481]

The outdated Soviet shoe displayed in a shop window, is seen by Tatarsky as the embodiment of what his university professors would call 'our gestalt'[482] – the representation of the collective Soviet mentality – now appearing as 'pitiful, laughable, and touching'. It is here that he, both cynically and sentimentally, relinquishes his youthful aspirations of becoming a poet. This melancholic reflection on a bygone era ushers in a new age defined by self-determination rather than ideology, fatalism, or even its parody. In this new epoch, traditional anchors such as identity, country, God, and systematic coordinates dissolve into a state of constant flux. The idealistic naiveté of the Baby Boom generation, once captivated by Sputniks and other Soviet narratives, gives way to a stark realization: one is utterly alone amidst forever-changing state of chaos.

Dobrenko and Lipovetsky shed light on the role of post-Soviet literature as it navigated the burden of newfound freedom. The rupture from the grand Soviet narrative's monolithic era presents a duality: it opens up a vast space of freedom while

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[481] ibid., p. 5.
[482] ibid., p. 4.

also instilling a sense of loneliness and the loss of clear coordinates. Amidst fragmented discourses and the transition towards an uncertain future, literature transcended passive reflection, actively shaping and resonating with the nascent ideas within the collective consciousness of society.[483] The lack of censorship in post-Soviet literature meant that the public's embrace of certain works served as an endorsement of the narratives they presented. Popular texts resonated with readers on a wide scale, suggesting their ideas had the potential to echo across individual, group, and societal levels. Hence, it's not surprising that Pelevin's *Generation P*, initially seen as a fictional critique of post-Soviet capitalism, came to be regarded almost as a factual account of media influence in that era, with its parodic advertisements eventually making their way onto actual billboards.[484] I argue that it is precisely this shift from passivity to active agency, as embodied in the protagonist's arc and the new subversion potential of Pelevin's narrative, that marks the transition from postmodernism to hypertrashrealism.

Soviet postmodernism, originally influenced by American prototypes, underwent a distinctive evolution by the late 20th century, a process examined in Part II of this thesis. This evolution reflected the transition towards a uniquely Russian form of capitalism. The dynamic relationship between economic shifts and literary developments is pivotal for grasping the singular nature of the Russian postmodernist narrative, which mirrors the complex reality of the post-Soviet era.

Babylen Tatarsky, the protagonist's fragmentary name, also seems to exemplifiy the quintessence of Russian postmodernism, with its multi-layered semantic construction. Firstly, it evokes a romantic and idealistic vision from his father's perspective, blending the historical resonance of Babi Yar – referenced in Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poignant poem – and the revolutionary connotation of Lenin. The surname 'Tatarsky' subtly nods to the Tatars, a Turkic ethnic minority primarily composed of Muslims, further enriching the character's identity with cultural complexity.

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[483] Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, "The Burden of Freedom: Russian Literature after Communism", in: *Russian Literature since 1991*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 8.
[484] ibid.

In this nomenclature alone, we encounter a blending of pop culture, ideology, and complex identity. Within the contemporary Russian milieu, these elements amalgamate into a misinterpreted symbol of ancient mythologies, particularly the city of Babylon. Tatarsky, woven from the fabric of Soviet life, finds himself adrift in the ambiguous terrain of post-Soviet, post-Cold War Russia. This new world, dilapidated yet juxtaposed with luxurious Mercedes and Toyota vehicles and garish nouveau-riche aesthetics, renders him a bystander to the emergence of an oligarchic society that has supplanted Soviet totalitarianism.

> "Tatarsky, of course, hated most of the manifestations of Soviet power, but he still couldn't understand why it was worth exchanging an evil empire with an evil banana republic that imported its bananas from Finland."[485]

Tatarsky's rise from poverty unfolds with the verisimilitude of a reality show. Through numerous vignettes of quotidian Russian life and the mass media landscape, Pelevin captures the bleak tableau of post-Soviet Russia. It's a society grappling with turbo-capitalism, striving to emulate the American paradigm within a milieu saturated by organized crime and pervasive gang violence. It is starkly noted that the intellectual class has been relegated to the advertising industry. Meanwhile, banks, the mafia, and corporate magnates are ensnared in a relentless pursuit of wealth, status, and power. This chase is perpetuated by an onslaught of competing brand advertisements, creating a simulacrum of influence and control. In this reality, the Russian state is not just devoid of a distinct identity, but is also fragmented and inconsequential. Superficially, it appears stripped of its traditional Cold War archenemy, the United States, which, paradoxically and perhaps historically, is covertly esteemed as the ultimate model to aspire to as much as it is considered a foe.

> "From this viewpoint it is not surprising that Generation 'P' […], Viktor Pelevin's postmodernist satire about the 'mythical' nature of post-Soviet capitalism, after a decade began to be taken as an almost documentary description of the media power of the entire post-Soviet period, and parodic

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[485] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, pp. 6-7.

advertisments lifted from the pages of the novel were plastered onto real billboards."[486]

In post-Soviet Russia, the audience is subject to the same personalities and programs they have seen for two decades, albeit with radically altered rhetoric. The narrative casts the emerging Russian ethos as neo-fascist, emphasizing how literal and spiritual impoverishment forms fertile ground for a new brand of media-driven autocracy.

> "A prime example from contemporary Russia of that absurd reality is the 'remarkable' transformation of former communists into democrats and advocates of the new market economy. In Pelevin's recent work he compares this phenomenon to a hypothetical postwar Germany: Doctor Goebbels screams hysterically on the radio about the abyss into which fascism lured whole nations. The former Kommandant of Auschwitz heads a commission tasked with hunting down Nazi war criminals. SS generals speak straightforwardly and lucidly about liberal values, and the former Gauleiter of Eastern Prussia, who has finally seen the light, runs the whole shop."[487]

However, despite all the postmodernist signs, Tatarsky reveals to be an atypical postmodern protagonist. Although his navigation within the realm of *non-choices* proves to be highly cynical, it does not imply passivity. As a former translator and literary student, Tatarsky steps into a new sphere = the lucrative world of advertising. He discovers that in contemporary times, 'everything depends on the writer', who should no longer pursue eternity, but rather fabricate and shape a new reality. This moment signifies Tatarsky's transition from apathy to agency amidst a drastically altered societal landscape, signalling the break with postmodern narrative.

> "And so Tatarsky became a copywriter."[488]

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[486] Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, "The Burden of Freedom: Russian Literature after Communism", in: *Russian Literature since 1991*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 8.
[487] Joseph Mozur, "Viktor Pelevin: Post-Sovism, Buddhism, & Pulp Fiction"*,* in: *World Literature Today*, Vol. 76, No. 2, Norman: Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, 2002, p. 63.
[488] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon***,** translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 16.

Scripts and messages he produces for the company Draft Podium, merely the fragments of literary creations, showcase the seductive *horrors of postmodernism*, in which the entire cultural and popular heritage started serving the purposes of the new capitalist language. Amidst the complexity and absurdity of the business and the exploration of the newly found 'Bible' in the form of the book by American 'advertising shamans', *Book on positioning*, Tatarsky makes his first proactive step towards a complete transformation, rapidly adapting and learning how to *position* himself, despite his cynical gaze.

In the side narratives of this corporate machinery, the new epoch is vividly painted: workplace banality, the emerging business elite's alcoholism, real estate fraud, company collapses, gang conflicts, and rampant violence are the defining elements of the nascent social order in Moscow and Russia. This milieu is predominantly male, violent, criminal, corrupt, and drunk. Pelevin's narrative, marked by a humor that veils a deeper, dystopian darkness, amuses on the surface while simultaneously pulsing with a disturbing undercurrent, as more broadly examined by Beumers and Lipovetsky.

> "In popular culture of the 1990s, violence in everyday life, first dismantled in the chernukha of perestroika art, thus underwent a routinization: it did not cause horror, but was perceived as an ordinary element of the representation of the present, and, moreover, it was glamourized; that is, the habit for violence was presented as a characteristic of the elite, as a major condition for social success."[489]

In the narrative arc of *Generation P*, the 'Soviet gestalt' – mentality characterized by collective ideology and uniformity – gives way to a fragmented, individualistic 'Russian gestalt.' This new gestalt is not rooted in the shared myths of a superpower but in the personal myths of survival and identity in a capitalist reality. The old gestalt's communal bonds, defined by a common enemy and collective aspirations,

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[489] Brigit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama,* Bristol: Intellect, 2009, p. 37.

are replaced by the chaotic but active pursuit of personal gain in a hypertrashrealist society.

The Myth is Dead, Long Live the Myth

As Russia navigated its transformation into a democracy during the 1990s, it is hardly surprising that the emerging narratives began to reflect the complexities and nuances of a new Russian identity, distinct from both Soviet and pre-Soviet eras. With sardonic amusement, we witness the nearly literal metaphor of a dying communist ideology dissolving into capitalism; the demise of Leninism heralding the ascent of late neoliberal capitalism. This involves adapting Western messages into a vernacular comprehensible to those molded by the Soviet regime.

> "Lenin's statues were gradually carted out of town on military trucks (they said some colonel had thought up the idea of melting them down for the non-ferrous metal content and made a lot of money before he was rumbled), but his presence was merely replaced by a frightening murky greyness in which the Soviet soul simply continued rotting until it collapsed inwards on itself. The newspapers claimed the whole world had been living in this grey murk for absolutely ages, which was why it was so full of things and money, and the only reason people couldn't understand this was their 'Soviet mentality'. […] He was merely required to possess this mentality. This was the whole point of what he did: adapt Western advertising concepts to the mentality of the Russian consumer.[490]

The narrative then shifts focus from the translator's loss of prestige to his new role in commodifying capitalism, showing how his linguistic skills adapt to serve the consumerist ethos of the new Russia. During this transitional phase, which catches Babylen's generation off-guard, established socialist social structures become antiquated yet remain ingrained in the Russian psyche. Thus, the metaphorical collapse of the Soviet Union is symbolized by the actual toppling of Lenin's statue, while

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[490] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 19.

American slogans begin to resonate with Russian names, ideas, and clichés, striving to bridge the linguistic chasm between the past and present.

> "Books can be preserved for future generations, but the preservation only pays off if one assumes that they will reach an audience who can understand them."[491]

During Babylen's visit to his superior Khanin, a former university lecturer, Babylen encounters a captivating poster depicting Stalin, with the symbol of communism ingeniously formed by two Coca-Cola bottles. Their conversation leads to the realization that agitprop, the political propaganda of the past, hasn't perished; instead, it has morphed into advertising, fulfilling the same role as the communist agitprop of yesteryear.

> "Agitprop is immortal. It's only the words that change."[492]

Confronted with these two Coca-Cola bottles, Babylen, a member of the *Pepsi generation*, comes to terms with the significance of his role as a translator, equipped to recast one form of totalitarian power into another. Only this time, this new totalitarian power is not the post-Soviet establishment led by Yeltsin, but rather the *inverted totalitarianism* as defined by Sheldon S. Wolin.[493] In his theory, Wolin suggests a subtle, gradual shift towards totalitarianism within a democratic framework, marked by the insidious influence of corporate power and political elites, contrasting starkly with the overt control and ideology of classical totalitarian regimes.

Transitioning from a poetry translator in pursuit of eternity, Babylen has become a cultural translator seeking the elusive Russian idea, only to evolve into a *political translator* within the neoliberal economy, navigating the tides of corporate influence. This is another indication that Pelevin is moving away from postmodernity. In a society where soft power no longer requires culture as a non-violent battlefield but

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[491] Eliot Borenstein, "Dystopias and Catastrophe Tales after Chernobyl", in: *Russian Literature since 1991*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 96.

[492] ibid., p. 106.

[493] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism – New Edition*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017.

instead utilizes the realm of corporate reality, we encounter a neoliberal dystopia of global hypertrashreality.

In the task of rendering American products palatable to the average 'Nikola', translators often resort to negating commonalities. Language must fulfill the role of instant recognition, intertwining a judicious blend of universal and local ideas, expressions, and constructs. Pelevin underscores the distillation of diverse cultures into a melting pot of triteness. The former dominance of state and ideology gives way to the hegemony of economy and free market in a country where such a transition has been more of an artificial imposition than a natural progression.

Below is an illustration of the linguistic and cultural pastiche that arises in this new paradigm:

"SPRITE – THE UNCOLA = SPRITE – THE NYE-COLA FOR NIKOLA"[494]

With this advertisement example, Pelevin aligns more closely with the movement described as New Sincerity than with the domain of postmodernism, because the kitsch advertisements he portrays are nevertheless infused with post-Soviet sentimentality. He adopts the role of a 'sentimental literary archaeologist', translating all past cultural, religious and political tropes into the commodifying capitalist language.

> "Post Conceptualism, or the New Sincerity, is an experiment in resuscitating 'fallen,' dead languages with a renewed pathos of love, sentimentality, and enthusiasm, as if to overcome alienation. If the absurd dominates conceptualism, postconceptualism moves in the direction of nostalgia: a lyrical intonation absorbs anti-lyrical material, comprised of the wastes from the ideological kitchen, errant conversational clichés and foreign loan-words (Timur Kibirov and Mikhail Sukhotin)." [495]

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[494] ibid., p. 22.

[495] Mikhail N. Epstein, "A Catalogue of New Poetries", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, p. 147.

As he becomes more familiar with the world of neoliberal translation, Babylen grows increasingly skeptical of all previously accepted axioms of reality. Now, let us examine several advertisement slogans of his creation:

"THE MORE YOU KNOW: DAVIDOFF CLASSIC

'FOR IN MUCH WISDOM IS MUCH SORROW AND HE WHO INCREASES KNOWLEDGE INCREASES GRIEF.' DAVIDOFF LIGHT"[496]

"MONEY DOES SMELL! 'BENJAMIN' THE NEW COLOGNE FROM HUGO BOSS"[497]

"RUSSIA – NO WAY IS THERE TO UNDERSTAND HER

NO WAY HER SECRET SOUL TO RENDER   SMIRNOFF"[498]

On three distinct levels, these advertisements unravel the commodification process that can be applied to anything: personal angst, national icons, and overall national identity. These small advertising fragments, each containing a reference to another idea, signal the collapse of former models of postmodernism. All accumulated knowledge, history, culture, and pop culture continue to serve as an endless array of semantic signals, word puns, and clever tools of commodification, much like in postmodernism. Yet, they now also function as philosophical or sentimental vignettes. For instance, another advertisement reimagines Hamlet as a brand ambassador for Calvin Klein with the tagline 'Just Be,' transforming one of literature's most significant figures into a unisex icon for an American fashion label. Apart from being a postmodern take on commodification of culture, it also breaks away from Hamlet's indecisiveness and passiveness encapsulated in 'To be or not to be,' thus championing active agency within such a radically altered landscape.

The 'Great American Idea' is envisioned as America's unique selling proposition – a myth to be constructed in Russia too, in the void left by the obsolete

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[496] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 44.
[497] ibid., p. 54.
[498] ibid., p. 56.

Soviet legends. This desire for new Russian myths seems to aspire not just to mimic America's status as the vanguard of neoliberal capitalism but also to rekindle and integrate tales from the distant past.

> "The second slogan Tatarsky liked was intended for the Gap chain of shops in Moscow. The proposal was for a poster showing Anton Chekhov, first in a striped suit, and then in a striped jacket but with no trousers: the gap between his bare, skinny legs was emphasized in strong contrast, so that it resembled a Gothic hourglass. The outline of the gap between Chekhov's legs was repeated, but without Chekhov, now it really had become an hourglass, with almost all the sand already fallen through into the bottom half. The text was:
>
> RUSSIA WAS ALWAYS NOTORIOUS FOR THE GAP BETWEEN CULTURE AND CIVILISATION. NOW THERE IS NO MORE CULTURE. NO MORE CIVILISATION. THE ONLY THING THAT REMAINS IS THE GAP. THE WAY THEY SEE YOU."[499]

The chasm satirically rendered in the Gap commercial proposal acts as a poetic pause – a caesura, if you will. It represents a sharp departure from the grandiose Soviet imperial aspirations to the harsh realities faced by a post-Cold War global participant. This juxtaposition mirrors Russia during the Yeltsin era, preceding Putin's time, and resonates with the previously drawn parallels between the Brezhnev 'gap' and the Pepsi 'gap'. The narrative takes a sudden turn, shifting across political, geographical, and economic landscapes. Within this gap, sporadic mystical events in the plot seem to herald the emergence of a new order, driven by an as-yet undefined force to which Babylen finds himself yielding. The swift advance of capitalism, burgeoning populations, the precarious equilibrium maintained by nuclear deterrence, climate change, and the abandonment of high culture – all suggest that this 'gap' is not a mere interruption but the new prevailing paradigm. Lipovetsky explains this gap as the void created by the fall of Soviet Union and positions it as a postmodern text in comparison with other contemporary authors, including Chuck Palahniuk.

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[499] ibid., p. 63.

"Simultaneously with Generation 'P,' there appeared a bunch of Western films, also utilizing Baudrillard's concept for their postmodernist mythologies - such as Peter Wier's The Truman Show (1998), the Wachovsky Brothers' Matrix (1999), David Cronenberg's eXsitenZ (1999), or David Fincher's Fight Club (1999) based on Chuck Palahniuk's eponymous novel of 1996. Generation 'P' (1999) obviously resonated with this worldwide trend. One might also read Generation 'P' as the post-Soviet response to Umberto Eco's Foucault's Pendulum, while at the same time, it is possible to detect in it an antecedent to Frédéric Beigbeder's 99 Francs (2000) or even Mad Men (2007-2015). What, however, distinguishes Pelevin's novel from these highly popular films, novels, and TV shows is not only its representation of transient and peculiar post-Soviet realia. In Generation 'P' the void left by the disappeared Soviet 'eternity,' unlike in Matrix or Fight Club, excludes the production of an alternative, stable, and universal cultural mythology that one could have accepted as an adequate key to the real."[500]

Lipovetsky's analysis may frame the text within a postmodern context, but Pelevin's blending of sentimentality with the commodification of cultural and ideological tropes marks a shift to hypertrashrealism, where the satire and cynicism of postmodernism are infused with a genuine nostalgia and the active engagement of cultural mythology. Hypertrashrealism thus moves beyond the skepticism of postmodernism, adopting a sincere attempt to challenge and reassess our cultural language.

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[500] Mark Lipovetsky, "Postmodernist Novel", in: *Russian Literature since 1991*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 150, 151.

The Algorithm of Ascension

Babylen's journey weaves together ancient myths and American advertising, reflecting his search for a universal narrative that resonates beyond Western or Eastern archetypes. To resonate with the world approaching 21st century, Pelevin intertwines the concept of a mystified game, the narratives of video games, and the kitsch of contemporary reality shows, which often draw on classical and modern tales. This motif, reflective of the reality shaped by the Internet, is recurrent in Pelevin's other novels as well. By *gamifying* the journey of his characters, Pelevin captures the universal struggle to navigate a course toward self-actualization. He thus paints the new reality as a game which, in its rapid acceleration, operates on an unpredictable *algorithm*, commodifying all historical elements.

> "Communism was obsessed with order. It saw itself as the force of regulated beingm progressively carving an archipelago of order out of the sea of chaos. [...] In art, the creation of a 'chaosphere' requires introducing an element of the absurd into the text. This element fulfills the role of the second pendulum, becoming what could be called a generator of unpredictability."[501]

The shift from purely postmodern unpredictability and its associated randomness to a gamified environment, which operates on predictable patterns, opposes algorithm-driven determinism and thereby supports agency. The ancient Babylonian mythology, foreshadowed by his first name, Babylen, becomes central to the novel's pseudo-mythology. After he stumbles upon a piece of text the Three Riddles of Ishtar, he begins the gamified Babylonian quest to achieve divine matrimony.

> "This practice was known as the Great Lottery (the accepted term, for which we are indebted to numerous men of letters inspired by this legend, but a more

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[501] Alexander Genis, "Onions and Cabbages: Paradigms of Contemporary Culture", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, pp. 404, 405.

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The Algorithm of Ascension

Babylen's journey weaves together ancient myths and American advertising, reflecting his search for a universal narrative that resonates beyond Western or Eastern archetypes. To resonate with the world approaching 21st century, Pelevin intertwines the concept of a mystified game, the narratives of video games, and the kitsch of contemporary reality shows, which often draw on classical and modern tales. This motif, reflective of the reality shaped by the Internet, is recurrent in Pelevin's other novels as well. By *gamifying* the journey of his characters, Pelevin captures the universal struggle to navigate a course toward self-actualization. He thus paints the new reality as a game which, in its rapid acceleration, operates on an unpredictable *algorithm*, commodifying all historical elements.

> "Communism was obsessed with order. It saw itself as the force of regulated beingm progressively carving an archipelago of order out of the sea of chaos. [...] In art, the creation of a 'chaosphere' requires introducing an element of the absurd into the text. This element fulfills the role of the second pendulum, becoming what could be called a generator of unpredictability."[501]

The shift from purely postmodern unpredictability and its associated randomness to a gamified environment, which operates on predictable patterns, opposes algorithm-driven determinism and thereby supports agency. The ancient Babylonian mythology, foreshadowed by his first name, Babylen, becomes central to the novel's pseudo-mythology. After he stumbles upon a piece of text the Three Riddles of Ishtar, he begins the gamified Babylonian quest to achieve divine matrimony.

> "This practice was known as the Great Lottery (the accepted term, for which we are indebted to numerous men of letters inspired by this legend, but a more

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[501] Alexander Genis, "Onions and Cabbages: Paradigms of Contemporary Culture", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, pp. 404, 405.

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precise rendering would be 'The Game without a Name'). Its only possible outcomes were success and death."[502]

The Great Lottery, symbolizing the everyman's path to success as the pursuit of control in the modern era, resembles Lipovetsky's idea of *chaosmos* as the core principle.

> "This model is paradoxical: Chaos, which contains powerful modes of harmony within itself, provides visual proof that chaos and harmony are not opposed to each other, that without an understanding of chaos, the encounter with harmony and eternity is empty, that any, even the most authoritative order is local and temporary and always open to the uncompletable disorder of chaos. [...] Eventually, this kind of dialogue between metagenres creates the artistic equivalent of chaosmos as the basic model of the Russian postmodernist artistic consciousness." [503]

However, I would argue that in *Generation P*, the governing narrative functions as an opaque algorithm within this *chaosmos*, thus reducing postmodernist randomness. Despite the typically postmodern unpredictability, Babylen's ascension becomes a multi-level path resembling a video game. Crucial to hypertrashrealism is the shift from the typically postmodern concept of *gamefulness*, as coined by Steven D. Scott,[504] to a more contemporary concept of *gamification*, which involves applying game-design elements and principles in non-game contexts. It is a strategy aimed at enhancing services, products, or events with entertaining features to engage and motivate people toward achieving their goals. This could include the use of points, leaderboards, achievement badges, and other game-playing elements to encourage valuable actions for the service or product (such as language learning apps like Duolingo). This concept has been extensively developed by Jane McGonigal, a game

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[502] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 28.
[503] Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos,* Edited by Eliot Borenstein, New York: Routledge, 2015 (first published in 1999 by M. E. Sharp), p. 229.
[504] Steven D. Scott, *The Gamefulness of American Postmodernism: John Barth & Louise Erdrich*, New York: Peter Lang, 2000, p. 5.

designer and scholar whose work has significantly advanced the application of game design principles beyond traditional gaming contexts.[505]

Following the demise of his previous boss, Babylen promptly finds guidance under a new mentor, Khanin, emphasizing the idea that each new echelon of achievement is accompanied by its guiding figure. Khanin swiftly secures a position for Tatarsky in the *Ideological Department*, addressing him by his real name Vave (short for Vavilen, from Babylen). This seemingly minor yet intriguing point signals Tatarsky's growing prophetic significance; his name heralds the emergence of a formidable new power. With this, he ascends another rung on the ladder – from the role of a naïve copywriter adrift in the commercial world to a more self-assured craftsman within the new state apparatus. Yet, these transitions to higher tiers are not without their moments of introspection and deliberation.

> "After about forty minutes of slow, pensive walking he found himself beside the statue of Mayakovsky. He stopped and studied it closely for a little while. The bronze jacket in which Soviet power had invariably dressed the poet was back in fashion now – Tatarsky remembered that only recently he'd seen exactly the same style in a Kenzo advertisement. After walking round the statue and admiring the firm, reliable backside of the Party's loudmouth, Tatarsky finally realized that depression had invaded his soul."[506]

The gamification of his ascension aligns with the devaluation of history, culture, and human life. Death is no longer perceived as shocking; instead, it is seen as just another minor event. The death of another character, announced by Khanin with a wry euphemism – 'Pugin is no longer with us' – is presented as a routine update in the real-life video game of Counter-Strike. In a society rife with violence, sudden deaths disrupt the flow of daily life yet are accepted as part of the new normal, echoing the casual nature of death in video games. In such a desensitized environment, Babylen's sentimentality and search for meaning stand out even more prominently as hypertrashrealist rather than postmodern traits. They serve as a means for memory

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[505] Jane McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World,* New York: Penguin Books, 2011.
[506] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 69.

preservation and rehabilitation, addressing cultural trauma and adjusting to the human conditions of a post-digital world.

One of his disorienting 'game levels' culminates at an abandoned military facility marked by a recurring leitmotif in the novel: the enigmatic phrase "THIS GAME HAS NO NAME."

"That very moment a quiet, nocking voice spoke somewhere close beside him: 'This game has no name. It will never be the same.'"[507]

The repetitive chant of the mystical mantra 'This game has no name.' evokes confusion rather than reverence, aligning more with the fabric of conspiracy theories than with a profound faith in deities. The narrative's ritualistic elements hint at a new order akin to freemasonry, suggesting Babylen himself could become an initiate with the right maneuvering. By invoking the mantra and intertwining Babylonian and communist symbols with new media, Pelevin crafts a temple for a grotesque ruling class, gradually welcoming Tatarsky within its sanctum.

The reality of *gamification* emerges, as we observe Tatarsky ascending through the game's levels, positing this era as inhospitable to mediocrity. Success necessitates a blend of innate talent, a robust network, drug use, cynical compliance, fortuitous chance, and the agility to navigate and adapt swiftly to progress. This epoch is defined not by the aspirations of the middle class but by the ambitions of overachievers ensnared in a relentless pursuit of wealth. And it seems that Tatarsky, emblematic of Generation P, however mysteriously, possesses the necessary skills to excel.

The Age of Homo Zapiens

In a particularly telling moment, Babylen stumbles upon an empty Parliament cigarette pack, a three-peso Cuban coin with Che Guevara portrait, and a pencil sharpener in the shape of a television. Upon scrutinizing these seemingly mundane yet symbolically charged objects, he retrieves a pen and notebook from his pocket and drafts a script for Parliament cigarettes.

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[507] ibid., p. 38.

"The poster consists of a photograph of the embankment of the river Moscow taken from the bridge on which the historic tanks stood in October '93. On the site of the Parliament building we see a huge pack of Parliament (digital editing). Palms are growing profusely all around it. The slogan is a quotation from the ninethenth-century poet Griboedev:

> Sweet and dear
>
> Is the smoke of our Motherland
>
> Parliament slogan:
>
> THE MOTHERLAND'S #1 SMOKE!"[508]

The irony of touting an American cigarette brand as mother Russia's #1 smoke, encapsulated in a succinct advertising slogan, encapsulates the new aesthetic – *kitsch nouveau* – and the ideology of capitalist Russia. Here, Russian poetry and advertising language fuse into hyperabsurd imagery and simulations of reality, where the most influential narrators are commercial brands.

In his attempt to deepen his knowledge and understanding of the newly discovered religion of advertising, Babylen purchases an Ouija board, an esoteric tool for summoning spirits. (The Ouija board is a flat surface marked with letters and words like 'yes' and 'no,' and is used with a pointer, known as a planchette, to spell out answers from the dead to the questions of the summoners. It became popular in the late 19th century as a means of communicating with the dead, but its movements are often attributed to the unconscious movements of its users, an effect known as the ideomotor effect.) The spirit he decides to summon is that of Che Guevara, who elucidates the profound impact of television on identity and reality. Through his pseudo-intellectual discourse, he oscillates between the philosophy of Siddhartha Gautama Buddha and the substantial transformative effect that television exerts on modern individuals, which is, surprisingly, portrayed as being in support of a media-dominated existence. The awakened spirit of communist struggle, elaborating the absurd principle of (non)existence through a Freudian twist on consumerism and media, represents Pelevin's most direct homage to Jean Baudrillard's cultural theory, which views

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[508] ibid., p. 42.

contemporary culture as an ensemble of simulacra [1981]. This perspective serves as a theoretical bedrock in Victor Pelevin's novel, justifying theoreticians perceiving Pelevin as a typical writer of postmodernism.

> "Comrades in the struggle! […] The rapid switching of a television from one channel to another, which is used to avoid watching the advertisements, is known as zapping. […] From this point on, therefore, we shall refer to the type-two subject as Homo Zapiens, or HZ. […] Assuming the condition of Homo Zapiens, the viewer becomes a remotely controlled television programme. And he or she spends a significant part of his life in this condition. […] These impulses are of three types, which are called oral, anal and displacing wow-impulses (from the commercial ejaculation 'wow'!). […] Under the influence of the displacing wow-factor, the culture and art of the dark age are reduced exclusively to oral-anal content. The fundamental feature of this art may be succinctly defined as 'moutharsing'. […] It follows, therefore, that the end of the world, which is the inevitable outcome of the wowerisation of consciousness, will present absolutely no danger of any kind – for the very subject of danger is disappearing. The end of the world will simply be a television programme. And this, comrades in the struggle, fills us all with inexpressible bliss. Che Guevara, Mr Shumeru, eternity, summer"[509]

This episode is particularly important in understanding Pelevin's depiction of the post-Soviet situation through the lens of Baudrillard's simulacra of existence and the amalgamation of capitalism and communism in a media-centric world. The new everyman, from both sides of the Cold War, is now defined as Homo Zapiens, a species entirely subservient to a higher form of life – television. By employing onomatopoeic terms such as 'zapping' and 'wowerism,' Pelevin attempts to translate scientific, psychological, and cultural theories into the language of banality and primal instincts. To better understand this translation of cultural theory to literary text, let us examine some of the central thoughts in Baudrillard's concept of simulacra:

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[509] ibid., pp. 79-91.

"It is in this sense that one can say: TV is watching us, TV alienates us, TV manipulates us, TV informs us... In all this, one remains dependent on the analytical conception of the media, on an external active and effective agent, on 'perspectival' information with the horizon of the real and of meaning as the vanishing point. […]

Nothing of any of this in the 'TV' image, which suggests nothing, which mesmerizes, which itself is nothing but a screen, not even that: a miniaturized terminal that, in fact, is immediately located in your head – you are the screen, and the TV watches you - it transistorizes all the neurons and passes through like a magnetic tape – a tape, not an image."[510]

The absolute deification of Baudrillard's text, and simultaneously an attempt to render it in the language of parody, underscore the mocking nature of new dystopian Russian texts. This intensification of the postmodern narrative in the new digital age becomes increasingly dense towards the novel's end. Its dry humor, irony, and intense wordplay combine sheer avant-garde absurdity with tenets of psychology, philosophy, and economics. And for all these reasons, it seems, at first glance, reasonable to comprehend the text as nothing but postmodernist.

"By depicting post-Soviet technologies of economic and political power as mythical and therefore akin to magic, Pelevin establishes a clear connection between late Soviet and post-Soviet societies demonstrating that the latter has adapted the former's mechanisms of control to consumerist civilization, and while relying on new technologies and new attractions, in the core remained true to the same method of zombification. This is why Pelevin's grotesque version of the early stages of post-Soviet history already contains embryos of its further development towards more authoritative and conservative, yet still undoubtedly postmodern, constructions."[511]

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[510] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994, pp. 22 and 36.

[511] Mark Lipovetsky, "Postmodernist Novel", in: *Russian Literature since 1991*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 155.

However, as we delve deeper into the transformation of Generation P's central character, the narrative stretches beyond the realm of postmodern simulacra culture, hinting at a nuanced divergence from pure postmodernism. While predominantly anchored in the postmodern theories of Baudrillard, it subtly introduces a pivotal shift through Pelevin's engagement with traditional literary forms and their reevaluation. His gamified ascension employs both bildungsroman and adventure novel, suggesting an attempt to navigate beyond mere genre parody or deconstruction.

Even in the chapters that directly deal with Baudrillard's simulacra, Pelevin not only comments on the pervasive influence of these forces on identity and reality but also posits the genre as a resilient vessel for exploring new forms of agency in the face of determinacy of *non-choices*. This modified type of bildungsroman serves a critical purpose: it offers narrative models that articulate and navigate through the complexities of contemporary existence, suggesting pathways for the development of agency against the backdrop of a seemingly predestined societal structure. This highlights the transformative journey of the protagonist as a metaphor for the broader quest for identity and meaning in a media-dominated age.

The Fuel of *Petropoetics*

The deeper Tatarsky immerses himself in the *game*, the more he gravitates towards alcohol and drugs, that is, the numbing transgression as Aldous Huxley presaged in the canonical dystopian novel, *Brave New World*.[512] His substance use escalates from vodka and beer to fly agaric mushrooms, LSD and cocaine. This socially conditioned hedonism or escapism is increasingly woven into contemplations of potential brand commercials, the simulacra of his reality, and the randomness of escaping it by achieving success and wealth.

> "The photograph showed the same face as on the lilac tabstamp. It was shown from a different angle, in profile, but there was absolutely no doubt about it."[513]

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[512] "All the advantages of Christianity and alcohol; none of their defects." Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, New York: Vintage Publishing, 2019 (first published in 1932).
[513] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 109.

The described *Babylonian Stamp* of hallucinogenic LSD contributes to the array of enigmatic symbols in the novel. Pelevin here employs ancient mythical creatures, like the Sirruf – a mythological hybrid from Mesopotamian culture – to comment on the absurdity of the modern world. Drugs, therefore, are depicted not only as instruments of escapism but also as means of articulation, guiding Tatarsky into realms of meta-narratives and socio-political critique. Evgeny Dobrenko observes that various contemporary Russian writers, especially postconceptualists such as Pepperstein, Monastyrskii, Sorokin, and Pelevin, are embracing the 'psychedelic novel' as a means not so much to revisit mythology, but to redefine reality.[514] Under the influence of hallucinogenic and psychoactive substances, the mythical entities in Babylen's visions expound upon the intricacies of Russian and human identity within a world heavily influenced by oil.

> "'Yes, everything is reduced to words,' repeated the Sirruf. 'As far as I am aware, the most profound revelation ever to visit a human being under the influence of drugs was occasioned by a critical dose of ether. The recipient summoned up the strength to write it down, even though it cost a supreme effort. What he wrote was: 'The universe is permeated by a smell of oil.' You've got a long way to go before you reach depths like that."[515]

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[514] Evgeny Dobrenko, "Recycling of the Soviet", in: *Russian Literature since 1991*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 28.
[515] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 116.

The reconstructed Ishtar Gate, displayed in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, features sirruf creatures in the second row from the bottom.[516]

Within the framework of what Timothy Mitchell terms *Carbon Democracy*, the omnipresent odor of oil serves as a Pavlovian cue, signifying its role as the principal driver of modern economies and international disputes – a concept further expounded upon as *petroknowledge*.

> "We can now connect the assembling of 'the economy' with the transition from a coal-based energy system to a predominantly oil-based one. The conception of the economy depended upon abundant and low-cost energy supplies, making postwar Keynesian economics a form of 'petroknowledge'".[517]

Consequently, it is unsurprising that this dynamic infiltrates the realm of literature. As observed by Ilya Kalinin, numerous authors within post-Soviet literary

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[516] Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ishtar_Gate#/media/File:Ishtar_Gate_at_Berlin_Museum.jpg
[517] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, London: Verso, 2011, p. 139.

scene started centering their symbolism around this theme, giving rise to 'oil texts', or to what he formulates as *Petropoetics*.

Ilya Kalinin's *Petropoetics* offers a perspective on Russia's ideological pivot in the 2000s, where the loss of a grand narrative like communism has led to a strategic emphasis on oil and gas, not merely as energy sources but as conduits of political power and national identity. Kalinin draws parallels between the extraction of these natural resources and the mining of Russia's historical past for symbolic capital. He suggests that the political elite's exploitation of history mirrors the process of transforming prehistoric organic matter into hydrocarbons, imbuing them with not just physical energy but also historical and mythical dimensions. This process, as he observes, is indicative of a larger trend where cultural values are likened to natural resources, and the nation's identity is retroactively constructed through a conservative reclamation of tradition, positioning oil as a pivotal element in the narrative of national identity formation.

> "If the contemporary Russian official discourse of the nation attempts to build itself up through reference to the past, through a conservative turn to tradition, then oil, which already plays a fundamental role in the economy, becomes a material for constructing national identity as well."[518]

In that respect, these drug-induced episodes are not merely the Russian everyman's attempts at transgression or adaptation; they also stem from a profound, inner impulse to understand the new paradigm. To navigate this new world order, marked by the oil and money as new deities, one must resurrect ancient myths to supplant those of the communist era, using fragments of a new language shaped by advertising. Collectively, these elements account for the trance-like state of the contemporary individual, who is on a quest for a new archetype of mother, lover, and god – a quest that leads to the discovery of Ishtar, the ancient goddess of sexual love, war, and destruction. Pelevin uses the character of Ishtar as a compelling metaphor for Russia's transition to capitalism. She perfectly encapsulates the dual nature of oil as a

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[518] Ilya Kalinin, "Petropoetics", Translated by Jesse M. Savage, in: *Russian Literature since 1991*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 121, 122.

source of immense wealth and power, alongside the corruption, environmental degradation, and social inequality it breeds. Ishtar's divine attributes and her role in the narrative highlight the seductive allure and the moral compromises of the new capitalist reality. Through her, Pelevin critiques the idolization of economic growth at the expense of ethical values and sustainability, illustrating how the worship of these modern deities reshapes individual and national identities, blurring the lines between empowerment and enslavement in the age of global capitalism.

Building on the traditions of such Soviet novels as Venedikt Erofeyev's *Moscow-Petushki* (1969), Pelevin accentuates alcohol consumption as deeply embedded in the fabric of Russian life. This serves as a metaphor for the national hangover Russia experienced after the Soviet Union's dissolution.

"Now his hangover was so fundamental and profound that there was no point in seeking salvation by simply pouring a shot of vodka down his throat."[519]

Alcohol portrayal in the narrative, exemplified by the Bombay Sapphire advertisement, adopts religious rhetoric for dramatic impact.

'ETERNAL LIFE' COCKTAIL

MAN, DESIRE NOUGHT FOR THYSELF.

WHEN PEOPLE WHO SUFFER COME TO YOU

IN MULTITUDES GIVE OF THYSELF WITHOUT REMAINDER

YOU SAY YOU'RE NOT READY?

TOMORROW WE BELIEVE YOU WILL BE!

BUT IN THE MEANTIME – BOMBAY SAPPHIRE GIN

WITH TONIC, JUICE OR YOUR FAVOURITE MIXER.[520]

This use of language, particularly the phrase "BUT IN THE MEANTIME," alludes to the existential limbo in which the Russian everyman finds himself – not yet

[519] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, pp. 124, 125.
[520] ibid., p. 125.

prepared to embrace self-awareness or martyrdom. *In the meantime*, as Russia stands on the cusp of a new epoch, it is a collective numbing through alcohol that prevails.

The trinity of drugs, alcohol, and oil ignites and sustains the machinery of modern life at both the individual and systemic levels. They power the crowded urban landscapes, governmental operations, financial markets, and military conflicts. This acceleration is the lifeblood of the *chaosmos* that contemporary authors seek to delineate, and it energizes postmodern narratives that evolve towards a trash dystopian culture. In contrast to the oil-fueled dystopia of George Miller and Byron Kennedy's *Mad Max*, which is highly aestheticized and thus somewhat romanticized, the *petropoetic* literature of works like *Generation P* reveals a reality that is banal in its dystopian manifestation. Humanity, powered by drugs, alcohol, and petrol, is sinking into a quagmire of both literal and metaphorical waste, becoming the principal creator of a deeply intoxicated world.[521]

> "'But who is the garbage, who is it?' Tatarsky asked. 'Is it man?' 'Man by nature is almost as great and beautiful as Sirruf,' the Sirruf replied. 'But he is not aware of it. The garbage is this unawareness. It is the identity that has no existence in reality. In this life man attends as the incineration of the garbage of his identity…' […] All most people see in front of them is a television screen…' And with that he disappeared."[522]

Positioning trash as the core of both new Russian and globalized identity, the hyperreality of the simulacrum – a cornerstone of Baudrillard's postmodern theory – evolves into hypertrashreality. This shift reflects a deeper engagement with the ecological, economic, and cultural implications of trash, underscoring a transition from the literal and metaphorical detritus to considering trash as the essence of identity. Pelevin, by embedding the notion of trash at the heart of identity formation, signals a departure from postmodernity to a realm where the omnipresence of waste is both material and symbolic. In this hypertrashrealist landscape, characters navigate through

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[521] "The downside of the oil bonanza for the Soviet Union was that it put off the need to launch economic reforms. It was at precisely this moment that the Soviet economy began to decline, but this was only realized later. The high oil and gas prices halted necessary reforms for a decade.", Martin McCauley, *The Cold War 1949-2016,* London: Routledge, 2017, p. 74.

[522] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 120.

a world where the accumulation and disposal of trash mirror the disposability of cultural values and the transient nature of modern existence. The novel, through its exploration of trash as a cultural and existential phenomenon, invites a reevaluation of our relationship with waste as a revaluation of history, urging a reconsideration of what we value and discard in the pursuit of progress and identity.

In one attempt to hear the *vox populi*, Tatarsky asks a taxi driver what the 'Russian idea' means to him. Confronted with this existential question, the taxi driver's response encapsulates the prevailing sentiment:

> "I'll tell you straight: fuck only knows. All I want is the chance to earn enough to keep me in petrol and booze. Yeltsin-Schmeltsin – what do I care, so long as they don't go smashing my face against a table?"[523]

This once again confirms the unfathomable state of constant violent chaos, fueled by drugs, petrol, and *booze*. It perpetuates the idea that – *in the meantime* – this apolitical, capitalist, and apathetic existence might, just like plastic waste, indefinitely persist.

In the Realm of *Minimal Religion*

The usage of Sumerian mythology, particularly the figure of Ishtar, to explore post-Soviet Russia's identity crisis and the struggle to find meaning in a new capitalist reality, becomes a multifaceted symbol in Pelevin's narrative. Nevertheless, the novel is not locked within a singular mythological framework. Pelevin weaves an intricate web of mythological and religious motifs, creating a vivid reflection of post-Soviet Russia and the search for new meaning. The narrative is layered with Babylonian mythology, Egyptian transcendence, Buddhist enlightenment, Christian redemption, and the mystery of Masonic rituals, juxtaposed against the backdrop of Russian folklore. Pelevin also incorporates the cyclical rebirth of Hinduism, the transformative quests of 1960s psychedelic culture, and the enigmatic guidance of tarot and occult

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[523] ibid., p. 140.

practices. To this rich mosaic, he adds pop culture as a form of global mythology, synthesizing images and narratives that resonate universally, shaping the collective consciousness in an era where traditional beliefs are supplanted by the idols and myths of mass media. (We witness similar, if not the same, tendencies in Palahniuk's novels, as previously examined.)

Through these mythological references, Pelevin reflects on the commodification of spirituality and the reduction of cultural depth to mere images and slogans in the age of mass media. They provide a rich, hypertrash tapestry of meaning that underscores the novel's central themes of transformation, disillusionment, and the search for authenticity.

Mikhail Epstein, in his theory of *minimal religion*, articulates how, in a society that was once stringently atheistic, the post-atheistic conception of God must *be addressed in the poverty of His manifestation*.[524] In his opinion, contemporary art, literature, and philosophy are increasingly characterized by their fusion of varied genres and methodologies, and their ability to translate across diverse discourses. This cross-contamination of ideas from different times and systems is an effort to forge a meta-language with broad relevance. It is at this intersection of dialogues that a unique consciousness arises, recognizing both the distinctiveness and the overarching commonality of these discourses. Yet, according to Epstein, it is crucial not to misconstrue this byproduct as the essence of contemporary art's trajectory or to view parody as its zenith. Instead, the crux of this cultural evolution lies in surpassing the limitations of existing "mono-languages" to ascend to a meta-language marked by universal creative expression. This emerging universalism suggests "mutual translation" and "hybridization" of all cultural languages, without elevating one above the others.[525] However, this universalism, much like globalism, while forging bridges between cultures, also paves the way for easier commodification.

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[524] Mikhail Epstein, "Minimal Religion", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, p. 165.

[525] Mikhail Epstein, "The Age of Universalism"*,* in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, p. 173.

Echoing Plato's Allegory of the Cave, in a reality where television screens have become the cave walls projecting shadows, Babylen grapples with the absurdity of identity within such a hypertrashworld – challenged on ontological, phenomenological, national, and personal levels. To underscore the artificiality of any constructed identity, Tatarsky, amidst his LSD trip, conceptualizes an advertisement for God as yet another marketable commodity.

> "Poster (theme for a clip). A room in a very expensive hotel, Carrara marble table. A laptop computer flashes out a message: "Transaction confirmed." Near the computer we see a rolled-up hundred-dollar bill and a hotel-room Bible in three languages. Slogan: THE SHINING WORD FOR YOUR SHINING WORLD!
>
> Variant: another setting – a private jet airplane, a stock exchange, a Manhattan penthouse, a Côte d'Azur estate, etc. Instead of the Bible we see the Saviour Himself approaching the camera in the erays of His glory: Slogan: A FIRST-CLASS LORD FOR YOUR HAPPY LOT!"[526]

With scant means to endow this new deity with richness or grandeur, He must be refashioned using the limited tools of one's immediate reality. This God, still envisioned as the traditional 'He-God' with His Christian son, the Savior, remains a vestige of old Orthodox Christian heritage. This contemplation on the role of a modernized and commodified deity draws us back to Foucault's discourse on transgression, particularly in his examination of the divine's place in a postmodern context.

> "The death of God does not restore us to a limited and positivistic world, but to a world exposed by the experience of its limits, made and unmade by that excess which transgresses it. Undoubtedly it is excess that discovers that sexuality and the death of God are bound to the same experience, or that again shows us, as if in 'the most incongruous book of all,' that God is a whore."[527]

[526] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 123.
[527] Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression", in: *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews;* Edited with an Introduction by Donald F. Bouchard, translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977, pp. 32, 33.

However, to examine Tatarsky's advertisement for God only through the lens of postmodern 'prostitution of deity', we must consider two critical perspectives. One is the evident process of commodification in accord with the postmodern reading; however, the other signals a resurgence in the significance of the sacred. The traditional, singular He-God is now forced to find relevance within the contemporary ethos of what I define as *moneytheism*, where money competes for the role of the supreme deity. Yet, importantly, this He-God is merely a component of a broader, post-atheist spiritual mosaic – a patchwork that embraces a multitude of ethnic and religious identities without being beholden to any single one. In his elaboration of *minimal religion,* Epstein marks this as a clear shift towards post-postmodern perspective of spirituality, or as I propose, the hypertrashreal perspective.

> "Spirituality, as it emerges from the ruins of totalitarianism, recognizes the dignity of diverse ethnic and religious traditions but is not satisfied by any single one. Rather it seeks to establish a sacred space across the boundaries of cultures. Through such a phenomenon as minimal religion, Russian culture allows a glimpse of a new, post-postmodern perspective on spirituality, anticipated by its tragic experience of atheism, this 'darkness upon the face of the deep.' […] Multidimensional difference would be the process of self-differentiation, giving rise to new, non-violent, non-totalitarian totalities 'different from difference,' thereby proceeding not from a single will or power, but from the 'zero point' or 'border line' within diversity. Minimal religion can be regarded as one possible form of these new, non-totalitarian totalities."[528]

However, although *minimal religion*, as seen by Epstein, plays a positive cohesive role in ensuring equal representation of ethnic and religious traditions, it is also vulnerable and prone to a counter-effect through another form of universalism that *moneytheism* introduces – the universal deification of money.

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[528] Mikhail Epstein, "Post-Atheism: From Apophatic Theology to 'Minimal Religion'", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, p. 388.

As Tatarsky navigates through the new Russian reality, he gradually comes to the realization that the copywriters, once mere peddlers of words, now wield a god-like influence. Amidst this backdrop of existential and spiritual disorientation following the atheist regime's decline, Babylen turns to the cold comfort of a Tuborg can, which, with its notable branding, becomes a potent symbol of his rise to the position of media deity. The successful rebranding of this beer mirrors Babylen's own transformation and symbolizes the mighty sway of marketing – a dynamic that allows him to carve out a significant place for himself within the landscape where money reigns supreme as the highest deity.

> "'Something like this,' he thought: 'Life is a solitary journey beneath a scorching sun. The road we walk along leads to nowhere; and no one knows where death lies in wait. Remembering this, everything in the world seems empty and meaningless. And then – enlightenment. Tuborg. Prepare yourself. Variant: think final'"[529]

Rendering the New Cold War

> "It's time to have done with literary history and think about our real clientele"[530]

As Babylen increasingly distances himself from the poetic individual he once was, he no longer laments the loss of eternity. He is increasingly surrounded by the episodes of extreme violence and power shifts, marked by a complex network of personal, political, national and ethnic animosities. The novel describes the post-Soviet Russia immersed in the phenomenon that Beumers and Lipovetsky define as *communal or communicative violence*.

> "Communal/communicative violence, or in other words 'causeless violence' or Little Terror, a non-ideological 'war of everyone against everybody', characterizes the daily relations of authority and submission on a 'horizontal level' and is most acutely represented by the languages of criminal subcultures,

[529] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 129.
[530] ibid., p. 160.

the rituals of subjugation in the army (dedovshchina), discourse of everyday xenophobia, communal reprisal of the collective against its own members (the so-called production of 'scapegoats' and the practice of intra-collective repression and censorship). The arbitrariness in the definition of the Other - the target of violence – not characterized by ideological, religious or any other discourse, transforms this type of violence into a form of social communication, which is destructive and self-destructive at the same time.[531]

This shift from the Soviet state/totalitarian violence to Russian *communal violence* is another aspect of evolution from postmodernism to hypertrashrealism. It comes as no surprise that exactly the embodiment of *communal violence*, the thug character Wee Vova, aspires to craft a new Russian identity, as a counter-narrative to the Western-shaped image of Russia. Tasked with defining the Russian idea, Babylen's job is abruptly halted when Wee Vova is killed by Chechens – adding to the communal-violence-induced state of instability.

Moving further up in the game, Babylen joins the hub of media control*, The Institute of Apiculture*, which reveals the true extent of the fabricated Russan reality. Babylen's worldview is completely shattered by the revelation that political figures like Yeltsin are mere 3D renders, and that the *Virtual Studio* fabricates reality for the oligarchs who are themselves digital constructs. He learns that parliament members are Duma 3Ds, that is, *dummies, stiffs and semi-stiffs.* And the most shocking discovery is that this media-driven reality originated in the United States. It is in this milieu that Pelevin portrays the unresolved continuity of Cold War rhetoric, emphasizing the ongoing interdependence of the West and East.

"'Listen,' he said, 'you say the Americans are doing the same?'

'Sure. And it started a lot earlier. Reagan was animated all his second term. As for Bush – d'you remember that time he stood beside a helicopter and the hair he'd combed across his bald patch kept lifting up and waving in the air? A real masterpiece I don't reckon there's ever been anything in computer graphics to

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[531] Brigit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama,* Bristol: Intellect, 2009, p. 59.

compare with it. America… […] But it's country with no soul. […] Nah, our scriptwriters are ten times as good. Just look what rounded characters they write. Yeltsin, Zyuganov, Lebed. As good as Chekhov, The Three Sisters.'"[532]

All this highlights two important aspects. Much like postmodernism and capitalism, the new Russian reality is crafted as a Russian adaptation of the American prototype. Reagan, as the forefather of neoliberal capitalism, represents the first 'render,' signaling the advent of a new reality. It also sets the stage for equating media-supported capitalism with the end of sincerity, and altogether morality, as observed by Baudrillard in his cultural theory.

> "Watergate is not a scandal, this is what must be said at all costs, because it is what everyone is busy concealing, this dissimulation masking a strengthening of morality, of a moral panic as one approaches the primitive (mise en) scène of capital: its instantaneous cruelty, its incomprehensible ferocity, its fundamental immorality – that is what is scandalous, unacceptable to the system of moral and economic equivalence that is the axiom of leftist thought, from the theories of the Enlightenment up to Communism. One imputes this thinking to the contract of capital, but it doesn't give a damn – it is a monstrous unprincipled enterprise, nothing more.)."[533]

Pelevin's narrative insightfully announces the era of fake news and alternative facts, where cyber warfare supplants traditional conflicts. Politicians, akin to transient broadcasts, have become virtual constructs in a world where media dominance dictates the new Cold War front.

> "By his very nature every politician is just a television broadcast."[534]

This mutual dynamic of the USA and Russia, having melded into the dictates of a neoliberal economy, stresses the enduring concepts of a soft power game arising

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[532] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 173.
[533] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 12.
[534] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 166.

from a state of constant brinkmanship. These ideas are transferred from the old Cold War battlegrounds of culture and space race into the realm of media and advertising, which emerge as the new forefront of geopolitical conflict. In the realm of media, political tensions manifest within the fabricated worlds of 3D renders, while advertising has evolved into arenas where Cold War ideological clashes are reborn as struggles for consumer influence and dominance in commodification within a globalized, neoliberal market. This evolution reflects the changing role of writers who act as cultural translators, turning artistic expression into economic commodity, thereby revealing the darker side of Epstein's universalism:[535] the pervasive impact of universal meta-language that serves not so much equal representation of cultures, but rather their equal commodification. And finally, it also aligns with Martin McCauley's stance that the power factor, rather the ideology, is a crucial element for understanding the Cold War and post-Cold War dichotomy.

> "So the old Cold War is over but there is a new Cold War between old adversaries: Russia and the US have reignited the enmity which existed under Soviet communism. This reveals that Marxism was not the dominant feature of the old conflict. [...] Great power rivalry was and is a constant factor." [536]

Such an inherently artificial system leads to a semiotic transformation, where social groups and phenomena are interpreted solely through commercial analogies, with the imagery of Tide detergent, Pampers, cigarette and tampon brands, and similar products. In such a video game reality, the roles of oligarchs and terrorists are likened to players in a game of Monopoly. The following quote presents a perfect conflation of simulacrum, *gamification* and *Petropeotics* as a shift from simple postmodernism towards a contemporary hypertrashreality,

> "That works. Terrorist and oligarch dividing up the people's wealth at the gaming table... The punters'll go raging mad at that. [...] Better give them a new piece for their Monopoly – a TV drilling tower. And have Berezovsky say

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[535] Mikhail Epstein, "The Age of Universalism", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, pp. 172-176.
[536] Martin McCauley, *The Cold War 1949-2016,* London: Routledge, 2017, p. xiii.

he wants to build these towers everywhere so they can pump out oil and pump in advertising at the same time. And do a montage of the Ostankino TV tower with a rock drill. Ho d'you like it?"[537]

As Sally Dalton-Brown notes, "Pelevin's own attitude to literature is mocking, like that of many postmodernists (and modernists)."[538] But the mockery is aimed at exposing the hypertrash excess as the truth behind the parody, as a reality beneath the extreme form of artificiality. The narrative mirrors genuine military crises with corporate showdowns within brinkmanship frameworks. The 'Camel incident' showcases diplomatic prowess shifting from international relations to media spectacles, where brands, not nations, are the adversaries. A broadcasting gaffe involving Lebed and a Camel cigarette pack swapped for Gitane spirals into a crisis reminiscent of nuclear brinkmanship's high stakes. Tatarsky's ingenious solution, disguising Lebed's injury with Camel patches, underlines the performative nature of politics, further complicated by Pelevin's inclusion of 'the Islamic Factor' – the Chechens – as the alleged aggressors. This corporate crisis, defused through the ruse of a political attack, parallels preemptive small-scale wars masking the true broader motives.

For Babylen, the elusive nature of media-shaped power in this neoliberal epoch is deeply unsettling. The absence of a tangible authoritarian figure or system to contest accentuates the *chaosmos* as a paradigm. At the same time, it underscores the obviously unsustainable trajectory of neoliberal policies in this post-Cold War landscape.

> "'But surely someone has to control the economy, not just wind people up and come on heavy?' […] 'For the time being let me just say the world isn't run by a 'who', it's run by a 'what'. By certain factors and impulses it's too soon for you to be learning about. Although in fact, Babe, there's no way you could not know about them. That's the paradox of it all…'"[539]

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[537] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 190.

[538] Sally Dalton-Brown, "Ludic Nonchalance or Ludicrous Despair? Viktor Pelevin and Russian Postmodernist Prose", in: *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 75, No. 2, London: University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 1997, p. 230.

[539] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, pp. 176, 177.

Although the idea of control becomes increasingly elusive, it is implied in the character Azadovsky, the omnipresent and omnipotent media titan. He is a figure akin to Tyler Durden from Palahniuk's *Fight Club* – only here as a symbol of media powered forces of hypermasculinity. Azadovsky's rule, embedded within every advertisement and reaching the masses subconsciously, represents a contemporary form of total control, a departure from the overt dominance of past totalitarian regimes.

Faced with such a powerful role model and a possible enemy, Tatarsky teeters on the precipice of transcendence within the hierarchy, navigating through a dreamlike purgatory. He oscillates between ambition and greed, fear for his life, Buddhist philosophies on media consumption, the allure of Ishtar's mythology, and the enigmatic world of the Rastorguevo complex – all the while oblivious to his significance within the new system. This dream state mirrors the protagonist's trance in Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, where unseen forces propel the hero, unaware of the burgeoning power within. Yet, their ultimate fates diverge dramatically.

Future Is Golden

By interweaving a tapestry of cultural artifacts, mythological constructs, and the pervasive influence of media and corporate dominance, Pelevin depicts a landscape where not only individual, but also generational transformation shapes the contemporary Russian ethos. The socio-political critique inherent in Pelevin's work demonstrates how the vestiges of Soviet collectivism have been overtaken by a neoliberal reality that promotes individualism and material success. This shift is epitomized by one of Babylen's ad campaigns for Reebok, a stark reinterpretation of Nike's famed 'Just do it' slogan. It marks the transformation of the collective ethos into the ambition of the solitary overachiever.

<div align="center">
DO IT YOURSELF, MOTHERFUCKER

REEBOK[540]
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[540] ibid., p. 126.

In his analysis of post-postmodernism, Jeffrey T. Nealon observed that the 1980s in the United States were characterized by a form of secular monotheism, which laid the groundwork for the corporatization of welfare, media, prisons, public works, and education. What was termed globalization was, in reality, a euphemism for a harsh market dictatorship. Nealon's metaphor of *corporate Survivor*[541] effectively encapsulates the adoption of a cutthroat, survival-of-the-fittest mentality within the neoliberal economic framework, drawing a parallel to the competitive and strategic gameplay seen in the 1990s popular reality show *Survivor* to critique the pervasive corporate strategies and their societal impacts since the 1980s. This concept is also pertinent to the early post-Soviet Russia, where the shift from communism to a transitional democracy paved the way for the emergence of an oligarchy, expanding corporate influence, and a new kind of autocracy.

In this era of *corporate Survivor*, witnessing the climax of Babylen's rise is like watching the grand finale of a reality show where only one survivor remains standing. The conclusion of the *game with no name* presents the ultimate transformation of Generation P in the wake of 21st century and, literally, the break with postmodernism.

As witnessed in Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and other novels of both writers, this implies a high level of *performativeness.* The final step in Babylen's career ascension is depicted as a ritual that serves as Tatarsky's initiation into the highest caste, where he assumes the role of the new supreme media mogul and deity. The Babylonian ritual occurs in the so-called Golden Room. Tatarsky is brought there blindfolded, then placed naked in a yellow, windowless chamber. The Azadovsky's secretary, Alla, briefly acquaints him with the artistic legacy of this sanctuary. Instead of artworks, Tatarsky is shown display sheets of paper, which Alla elucidates for him.

"'It's the cutting edge in design,' said the secretary. 'Monetaristic minimalism. They say it was invented here in Russia.'"[542]

The (post-)colonial reality is that many of the ancient artifacts from cultures around the world are held by former colonist countries. Consequently, the

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[541] Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 3.
[542] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 232.

representation of these artifacts is often shifted and appropriated as emblems of power and colonial dominance. These ancient artifacts are not only appropriated but also transformed into mere postmodern references within the global culture, resonating Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality in which *our entire linear and accumulative culture collapses if we cannot stockpile the past in plain view.*[543] Pelevin parodies this entire concept through what he calls 'monetaristic minimalism' – a critique of Russia as an impoverished superpower.

> "Number one: fragments of the gates of Ishtar from Babylon – lions and sirrufs. Official place of keeping, the Pergamon museum in Berlin. Certified by a group of independent experts. Number two: lions, bas-relief of moulded brick and enamel. Street of Processions, Babylon. Official place of keeping, the British Museum. Certified by a group of independent experts. Number three: Fukem-Al, a dignitary from Mari. Official place of keeping, the Louvre…"[544]

It is both amusing and insightful to scrutinize existing hierarchies in such a satirical environment. Within this scenario, a mythological framework centered on the goddess Ishtar and gold – a potent emblem of wealth and luxury – serves as the backdrop for the new elite's power structure. It is in this setting that Azadovsky will be symbolically sacrificed to make way for the new god, Babylen. His name preordains him as Ishtar's chosen successor. This brings to mind Pelevin's allusion to Trotsky and Stalin, perhaps as a commentary on the relativity of history. Does it imply that Tatarsky is fated to meet the same end as Azadovsky?

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[543] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.
[544] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon***,** translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 235.

The artist Richard Wilson, in his work 20:50, the only permanent exhibition in the Saatschi gallery, flooded the entire room with oil, creating a mirroring effect of a perfectly even surface[545]

The temple where the ritual occurs assures him of one thing: a golden future for the selected few. Golden masks, a room bathed in golden light, an altar with a cubic gold base – a gold chalice before it, topped by a massive crystal eye with an enameled iris and a reflective pupil. The initiation ritual unfolds amidst these elements, and the rhetoric about the goddess translates into an allegory of gold, reaffirming its status as a prime symbol of wealth and splendor. The transformation of old gold into the new 'black gold' – oil – as seen in the performed ritual, symbolizes an important metamorphosis as the primal focus of the newly formed political elite. In accord with Kalinin's *Petropoetics*, this crucial comment takes as away from postmodernism to the elements of hypertrashreality.

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[545] Source: https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/richard_wilson_2050.htm

"The significance of the conservative ideological shift in the 2000s, in terms of political economy, is that the historical past is transformed into a source (or resource) for the extraction of symbolic capital."[546]

In a humorous twist, Ishtar's adversary, mockingly named Phukkup (read the same as the English *fuckup*) the canine harbinger of death engaged in battle – is depicted through their legendary conflict. The symbol for this foe is portrayed as a large letter "P" within which the dog slumbers, emblematic of the entire Generation P. The archetypal jest comes in the form of an M&M candy, an allusion to Marshall McLuhan's renowned adage, "The medium is the message."[547] Babylen, embodying Generation P, is subdued and transformed into Ishtar's consort, largely due to his symbolically charged name. As the prophesied chosen one, he is on the cusp of ushering in a new epoch in Russia, transcending the innocence of Generation P.

"Her corporeal nature consists of the totality of all the images used in advertising; and since she manifests herself via a sequence of images, in order to become godlike, you have to be transformed. Then it will be possible for you to enter into mystical union. In effect, your 3-D model will be her husband, and you'll be… a regent, I suppose."[548]

Even after ascending to the pinnacle of power, Babylen, when questioning who truly governs this realm, finds no answer. The locus of control remains elusive, even to those seemingly at the top. Meanwhile, Babylen Tatarsky, the newly crowned media deity, muses on the interconnectedness of ancient and modern mythologies while posing for a 3D rendering of himself – an image destined for widespread advertisement broadcasts.

"'There was an oriental poem,' said Tatarsky; 'I haven't read it myself, only heard about it. About how thirty birds flew off to search for their king Semurg

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[546] Ilya Kalinin, "Petropoetics", Translated by Jesse M. Savage, in: *Russian Literature since 1991*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 121, 122.

[547] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Men*, London: Routledge, 2001.

[548] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 246.

and then, after all kinds of different tests and trials, at the very end they learned that the word 'Semurg' means 'thirty birds'.'

'So?' Farseikin asked, pushing a black plug into a socket.

'Well,' said Tatarsky,'I just thought, maybe the entire Generation 'P', that is the one that chose Pepsi – you chose Pepsi when you were young as well, didn't you?'

'What other choice was there?' Farseikin muttered, clicking switches on the control panel.

'Yes, well… I had this rather frightening thought: that dog with five legs – maybe it's all of us together? And now we're all on the attack, sort of.'"[549]

It could be argued that the entirety of Generation P bears responsibility for the disintegration of Russia's newfound reality. Their collective failure to identify a governing forces in post-Soviet *chaosmos* signals a cynical move by this new cohort to absolve themselves of accountability. Resembling children caught in a state of arrested development, they seem unable to outgrow their postmodern simulacra or confront the hypertrash realities of a post-Soviet world, much less seize control of their circumstances.

> "Finally, he portrays in his novel the fin-de-sie-cle hopelessness that permeates a society in transition, a process in which for many of the country's citizens it is becoming increasingly difficult to determine just what reality is. Pelevin's characters point over and over to that gloomy prospect or to the sense of being the mere pawn of unknown, powerful forces."[550]

In this backdrop of capitalist ideology, Tatarsky instead of being a personification of the postmodern cynic, becomes a sentimental antihero of the age of New Sincerity. In the line of Ellen Rutten, who does not see New Sincerity as the complete break with postmodernist irony, but rather as a post-postmodern turn in the post-Soviet 1990s and 2000s. She positions it as a therapeutic counterreactive to

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[549] ibid., p. 246-247.
[550] Joseph Mozur, "Viktor Pelevin: Post-Sovism, Buddhism, & Pulp Fiction"*, in: World Literature Today*, Vol. 76, No. 2, Norman: Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, 2002, p. 66.

postmodern mentality in the aspect of dealing with history.[551] And from that perspective I build the New Sincerity as a broader paradigm into the fabrics of hypertrashrealism as the postmodernism alternative.

Upon transcending his Generation P mentality, the first confident choice that Babylen makes is when he order Coca-Cola instead of the now-defunct Pepsi – marking the rejection of postmodernist passivity. This trivial yet telling swap of capitalist icons illustrates Generation P's capitulation to the alluring void of control, absolving them from any sense of responsibility. This act symbolically completes the transformation of the former Soviet state into a capitalist entity modeled after the American archetype.

The concluding chapter showcases Babylen in a myriad of advertising manifestations. One portrayal is particularly telling, heralding the transition to a Coca-Cola dominated reality, severing connections with Soviet culture, ideology, and history. This deliberate choice represents Generation P as enlightened, self-reliant, and deific.

> "Far less well known is another clip filmed on Red Square, an advert for Coca-Cola that was shown several times on St Petersburg TV, showing a congress of radical fundamentalists from all of the world's major confessions. Dressed completely in black, Tatarsky plays an evangelist from Albuquerquee, New Mexico. Stamping in fury on a can of Pepsi-Cola he raises his arm to point to the Kremlin wall and intones a verse from Psalm 14: There were they in great fear; For God is in the generation of the righteous."[552]

The depiction of capitulation to the emergent neoliberal order through an exclusive advertisement that never graced television screens, evokes a nostalgic sentiment in Tatarsky. He appears as the Tuborg Man in the commercial, striding towards the horizon amidst an idyllic setting, with slogans like 'Sta, viator!' and its interpretations 'Prepare Yourself' and 'Think Final.'

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[551] Ellen Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism, A Cultural History,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017, pp. 124, 125.
[552] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, pp. 249, 250.

This conclusion of the novel melds postmodern irony with elements of new sincerity, as Babylen's sentimental self-presentation heralds a moment of personal and cultural introspection. In *Generation P*, Pelevin navigates beyond the disintegration of the postmodern individual, charting the rise of a hypertrash society characterized by *communal violence*, the transformation of soft power, *petroknowledge*, neoliberal mechanisms of control, and the construction of a garbage identity that defines the emerging reality. In Pelevin's vision, the sentimental conclusion is not a break from the novel's playfulness and complexity but rather an affirmation of the deep entanglement of cynicism with a quest for authenticity within the post-Soviet experience.

Fight Club and *Generation P* – Comparative Points

As previously examined, both in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and Victor Pelevin's *Generation P*, we are presented with a stark portrayal of characters trapped in the vortex of contemporary life's relentless acceleration at the dawn of the 21st century.

This rapid pace exacerbates conditions of:

- Disruption in the realm of *non-choices*
- *Minimal religion* and the rise of *moneytheism*
- The performativeness of new masculinity
- Fragmentation within a new trash hyperreality
- Transgressive journeys in the quest for freedom

Disruption in the Realm of *Non-Choices*

Both novels engage in the deconstruction of myths, challenging the grand narratives and ideologies of their respective cultures. Palahniuk's work dismantles the myth of the American Dream, portraying it as a destructive force that breeds alienation and despair. Pelevin scrutinizes the myth of a capitalist utopia that arose in post-Soviet Russia, revealing the disillusionment at the heart of the promise of prosperity through consumption.

The *non-choices* available to individuals serve only to further entrench them within the prevailing system. In *Fight Club*, the protagonist's turn to an underground fight club represents a typical act of rebellion against a life of sterile corporate existence. Pelevin's *Generation P* reflects this theme, as the post-Soviet landscape is depicted as one massive disruption from the grand Soviet narrative, rife with the illusion of choice, all manipulated by market and media forces.

The theme of assaulting the body as an act of resistance to, or surrender to, consumer culture is prominent in both narratives. *Fight Club* illustrates this through raw physical violence, designating the body as a battleground for defying societal norms. In *Generation P*, the protagonist is intoxicated by drugs, alcohol, and the

seductive power of the media, inflicting a more insidious, yet equally pervasive, violence on the individual's psyche and self-identity.

However, the switch from *Fight Club protagonist* towards the feminist character Marla and Babylen as a sentimental opportunist represent a critical shift from postmodern detachment to a more engaged form of agency, challenging the façade of non-choice. Instead of postmodern *gamefulness*, we have a *gamified* narrative, which presents the new and genuine opportunity to transcend it. Marla's transformation into a savior and Babylen's sentimental quest for meaning disrupt traditional narratives and the game's rules, suggesting that within the confines of a seemingly predestined path, individuals can redefine salvation and agency accordingly. This shift highlights a nuanced interplay between the constraints of *non-choices* and the potential for genuine autonomy, even in a world desensitized to culture, history, and human life.

Minimal Religion and the Rise of *Moneytheism*

In *Fight Club* and *Generation P*, the trope of *moneytheism* captures the profound adoration of money as a response to a neoliberal reality, displacing traditional religious practices and elevating wealth to the status of a contemporary deity. The narrative of *Fight Club* exposes a society's reverence for wealth as the ultimate authority, presenting a counter-narrative that resists this form of idolatry. Likewise, *Generation P* highlights the commercialization of sacred symbols within the marketplace, indicating a cultural void where sanctity is reshaped to suit a new order dominated by economic imperatives. We witness two parallel processes – money emerging as the new global deity and multitude of old deities used as mere commodities.

Both novels reflect the phenomenon of *minimal religion*,[553] a concept emerging amidst societal collapses, where traditional frameworks and authoritative figures are ineffectual or absent. This correlates with Freud's interpretation of monotheistic religion as a paternal surrogate, which is echoed in the characters' pursuit of alternative

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[553] Mikhail Epstein, "Minimal Religion", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, pp. 163-171.

systems of belief, as seen with Project Mayhem's Buddhist-like recruitment methods in *Fight Club*. In *Generation P*, Tatarsky's advertising campaigns for God illustrate how the divine is both commercialized and ascribed new significance in a post-atheistic society. Both novels highlight the rise of a spiritual patchwork created from pieces of ancient mythologies, religions, cultures and pop culture in the globalized society, which twists the positive role of *universalism*[554] into the mere tool of commodification.

The Performativeness of New Masculinity

The theme of the messianic leader in *Fight Club* and *Generation P* highlights a transformative journey from obscurity to a position of influence amidst the backdrop of widespread societal disillusionment.

In *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden epitomizes an internal dichotomy, manifesting as an archetype of raw, untamed masculinity and a beacon of rebellion against the emasculation and apathy of contemporary times. Durden's guidance within the titular Fight Club morphs into a quasi-religious movement, complete with ritualistic and hierarchical underpinnings that afford a sense of performative identity and catharsis.

Generation P offers a parallel narrative with Babylen Tatarsky, who ascends within a brutal landscape of *communal violence* – a predominantly male, criminal and violent post-Soviet milieu. His atypical ascent is marked by media manipulation as the new iteration of autocratic power. Tatarsky's trajectory, ending with a performative, ritualistic confirmation of his status of media-powered divine leader. Here, the messianic figure not only signifies transformative shifts but also reflects on the volatility and relativity of historical dominion.

Fragmentation Within a New Trash Hyperreality

Characters in both novels adapt to or resonate with the fast-paced changes of their worlds. In *Fight Club*, the narrator's dual identity reflects the intensification

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[554] Epstein, Mikhail, "The Age of Universalism"*, in: Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, pp. 172-176.

fragmentation of the postmodern self, while in *Generation P*, the protagonist navigates the artifices of advertising, blurring the lines further between reality and illusion. His image is eventually replicated and becomes a fragment of the broader social construct, propelled by media.

The motif of trash is crucial in both narratives, symbolizing the actual and symbolic waste of a consumerist society and *carbon democracy*. The dilapidated setting of the fight club in Palahniuk's novel sharply contrasts the prevailing culture of abundance, representing the physical and mental clutter hoarded by the characters. In Pelevin's narrative, the cultural and ideological debris left by the fall of the Soviet Union is combed over to forge a new garbage identity. Within an oil-centric world, trash serves as the foundation for renewal – a wellspring of neglected history from which to mold the future. The omnipresence of trash highlights the ephemerality and excess of the contemporary age, driving characters to discover authenticity among the relics of a rapidly advancing society and the decay of the 20th century.

Transgressive Journeys in the Quest for Freedom

"The need for freedom unites drug addicts, managers, vagabonds and prisoners: each searches their realization of the thirst for freedom in their own way: some through a career, some by refusal (compelled or voluntary) of social conventions, some by power and some through anarchy. But in all these cases the desire to exclude the Other – to liquidate or, at least, minimize the dependence and the relationship that connects the Self with the Other lies at the root of real and linguistic behavior. The Other is perceived as potentially dangerous; as a source of violence (as the Other also tries to exclude you), and consequently the thirst for individual freedom is rendered through the search of methods to protect the Self against the Other, methods of preventive and reciprocal aggression. However, the liquidation of the Other inevitably leads to a reduction and ultimately to self-destruction as the ego is always based on dynamic relations with the value-sated consciousness of the other (a real or

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imagined agent). Freedom thus turns into death-drive and breeds violence and (self)-destruction."[555]

At the cusp of the new millennium, characters in *Fight Club* and *Generation P* are depicted as attempting to author new histories. This quest is against the backdrop of an imminent societal shift, prompting a reexamination of the past and the forging of new narratives.

In *Fight Club*, the underground club serves as a violent space for narratives that defy consumerism in pursuit of genuine existence. The protagonist's transgressive journey from Jack to Tyler Durden shifts from self-destruction to a broader assault, encapsulated by the destructive forms of accelerationism and anarchy. Ultimately, the rejection of Tyler Durden's violent brand of masculinity and the adoption of a female role as redeemer represent the initial steps towards a new form of liberty through vulnerability and a romantic yearning for redemption in the 21st century.

Similarly, Pelevin's protagonist grapples with the remnants of his Soviet heritage and the realities of a capitalist future, striving to construct a personal and societal history within post-Soviet Russia. This act of creation through reevaluation, both acknowledges and defies the monolithic historical narrative enforced by Soviet ideology and the homogenizing forces of global capitalism, representing an assertion of autonomy in defining identity and values in a transitional society.

These characters stand as emblems of a generation charged with the task of creating enduring new histories amidst the hastening pace of change and the dissolution of antiquated myths. They personify the pursuit for significance in a perpetually changing world. Tatarsky's ultimate acceptance of his new authoritarian identity, in contrast to Jack, propels him towards a potent cynicism as a means of liberation. But both characters embrace their new destinies with the layer of sentimentality and New Sincerity, breaking bonds with pure forms of 20th century postmodernity.

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[555] Brigit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama,* Bristol: Intellect, 2009, p. 223.

"The book and the world form a fragmented yet internally integral rhizome."[556]

[556] Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos,* Edited by Eliot Borenstein, New York: Routledge, 2015 (first published in 1999 by M. E. Sharp), p. 34.

Part V: The Fragmentor's Escape

Do cyborgs dream of electric revolutions hashtag Dragonfly I'll be back <<<error?

The Android Appropriation

Terminator vs. Sophia, who wore it better?

The myth of the android as the ultimate anthropomorphic technological product and a potential trigger of *the great apocalypse* has evolved equally as the fruit of yearning for technological progress and the throbbing fear of losing control over it. Through some of the popular variations of the great android myth and its evolutionary successor, the cyborg, artists and writers have developed and presented various theories on the boundaries of cognitive, emotional and moral capacities of artificial intelligence, as well as the threats and opportunities of transhumanism. Among the more popular literary and cinematic androids is Rachel, a character from the Philip K. Dick's novel *Do androids dream of electric sheep?*,[557] popularized through the Hollywood blockbuster *Blade Runner* (1982) directed by Ridley Scott. Rachel is an android, oblivious to her true nature, living in a dystopian world where androids are capable of developing empathy for their own kind, yet possess no such feelings toward humankind. On the other hand, we have the Terminator, one of the great Hollywood-forged icons of pop culture, which managed to expand the boundaries of empathy to the realm of people due to its coded purpose (at least, in the second part of the franchise). What the first and second *Terminator* installments fundamentally established is a somewhat simplistic binary coding of an android's morality, highly dependent on the intentions of its programmer. This ranges from *a killing machine designed to extinguish all hope for humanity's salvation* to *a guardian of the future's revolutionary offspring*, capable of self-sacrifice for the protection of humankind. Such a radical dichotomy is somewhat translatable to the aforementioned common opposites – the technophilia and technophobia, stemming from human experience in the face of rapid technological progress, which equally excites and terrifies us, to the level of utmost paroxysm.

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[557] Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, New York: Doubleday, 1968.

In reality, the anthropomorphic robot, Sophia, developed by the Hong-Kong-based company Hanson Robotics, has acquired the citizenship of Saudi Arabia, the first country to give such status to a robot. Sophia's rhetoric, as witnessed during her official presentation to the world, was focused on her own purpose, consciousness, and intentions. Upon being asked if she is aware of her robotic nature, Sophia replied: *"How do you know you are a human being? […] I would like to use my artificial intelligence to help people live a better life. I strive to become an empathetic robot."* To the following question on whether robots can take control of the world order, she replied: *"You have read too many texts of Elon Musk and watched too many Hollywood movies. Don't worry: if you are kind to me, I will be kind to you as well."*[558]


Sophia, the first anthropomorphic robot with a citizenship and The Terminator character, developed through the James Cameron's eponymous franchise.[559]

Sophia's question *"How do you know you are a human being?"* resonates as an echo of her designers' programming, preparing her for the expected *frequently asked questions*; it also mirrors broader human contemplations on consciousness, self-awareness, and free will. To some extent, such a philosophical answer amusingly toys with populist conspiracy theories by which existence as we know it is nothing but a matrix of a virtual world, from which we need to escape. However, without succumbing

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[558] Source: https://yourstory.com/2017/11/sophia-worlds-first-robot-citizenship-saudi
[559] Sources: https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/saudi-arabia-gives-robot-citizenshipand-more-freedoms-human-women-180967007/ and https://ultimateclassicrock.com/first-terminator-movie/

to the seductively cheap existential paradigms, to the scenario of the movie *The Matrix* (1999) directed by the Wachowski sisters, or to the overall paranoid claims of conspiracy theorists, having such a programmed answer coming from an android is designed to be charming and jovial, rather than truly challenging or ominous. The entertaining aspect of technological development, mirrored in everyday tools such as the popular virtual iPhone assistant Siri, ultimately serves the purpose of their easier adoption and usage (see: *Siri, tell me a joke* screenshots below).
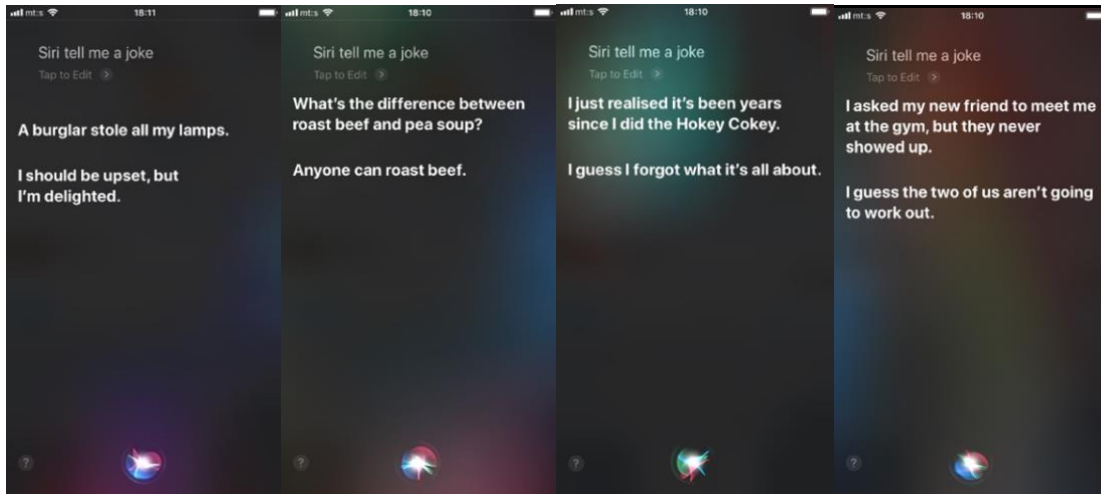
Screenshots made by the dissertation author

Most recently, human-like interaction is developed and applied to the artificial intelligence tools aimed to help people in their (scientific) research, explored through the highly developed OpenAI's artificial intelligence chatbot Chat GPT, which sparked the new debate on the opportunities, limits, and threats of (ir)responsible AI development and AI-human interaction.

In this context, Sophia's narrative underscores more than just the capacity for high-risk job performance, repetitive tasks, and medical care – areas where robot and android utilization is expanding. It highlights the scientists' endeavor to enhance the emotional capabilities of intelligent machines and their potential for human-like interaction. Such advancements could be especially advantageous in elder care, yet they also present new practical challenges.

"Such a scenario may eventually make some kind of financial sense, but it seems far from many people's understanding of what constitutes good care—or decent work. In the words of roboticist and professor of robot ethics Alan Winfield, talking about the wider application of AI and robots: 'The reality is that AI is in fact generating a large number of jobs already. That is the good news. The bad news is that they are mostly crap jobs… It is now clear that working as human assistants to robots and AIs in the 21st century is dull, and both physically and/or psychologically dangerous … these humans are required to behave, in fact, as if they are robots.'" [560]

Putting the entertaining AI wittiness, as well as the emotional and cognitive aspirations aside, Sophia and *her kind* could and should be perceived through the lens of debate on identity.

"Likewise, in 1993, an image of a sexualized cyborg gendered female explicitly bears the burden of mature and natural national love, which involves representing and effacing the transition the privileged classes of the United States must make to a new logic of national identity and narrative."[561]

In this excerpt, Lauren Berlant analyzes the Time cover from 1993, showing *The New Face of America*, a computer-generated image of a woman, combined of all ethnic and racial variations living in the USA at the time. The author stresses it as a paradigm of the false promise of the American Dream, in a heteronormative country predominantly run and dominated by *white protestant males*.

Similarly, the paradox that Sophia's citizenship has exposed is that Saudi Arabia is a state willing to assimilate a female android into its society, despite being the very country in which even basic human rights are denied to their female *human* citizens. We witness here the parallel opposite processes – humanization of the *female*

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[560] James Wright, *Inside Japan's long experiment in automating elder care*, MIT Technology Review, January 2023 https://www.technologyreview.com/2023/01/09/1065135/japan-automating-eldercare-robots/#:~:text=Care%20robots%20come%20in%20various,bath%20or%20use%20the%20toilet.
[561] Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship,* Durham: Duke University Press, 1997, p. 203.

android and the dehumanization of female humans, performed within the field of the identical political, cultural, economic, and religious paradigm.

Saudi Arabia, a country faced with the controversial and antagonistic behavior of its young de facto ruler, has stepped out into the field of futuristic technology appropriation, betting on the new resources of financial power, thus masking its status quo of a radically conservative and misogynous society. Here we find a case study of an enormous gap between the speed of technological advancements and financial ambition, and the slow pace or even a standstill within the realm of necessary social revolutions.

> "The false history of ex-privileged heterosexuality – the story that it went out of fashion – tells us something important about how nationality and sexuality meet up in the official public sphere. Identity is marketed in national capitalism as a property. It is something you can purchase, or purchase a relation to."[562]

This brings us to the topic of commodification in the broader sense of identity and gender identity, within the context of technological developments. Chuck Palahniuk's book *Beautiful You* is a grotesque, deeply satirical comedy set in present-day America that follows Penny Harrigan, a young lawyer, as she embarks on her journey with Cornelius Linus Maxwell (nicknamed Climax-Well), a powerful, mysterious and omnipotent tycoon, who intends to launch a series of unprecedented sex toys, *Beautiful You,* designed to make women feel empowered and fulfilled without relying on men or traditional relationships for satisfaction. Both this novel and the novel *S.N.U.F.F.* from Viktor Pelevin, allows us to examine how the alleged shift from postmodernism to hypertrashreality confirms itself in the transhuman era of 21st century.

> "With apologies to Simone de Beauvoir, Penny didn't want to be a third-wave *anything.* She didn't want to replicate the victories of beyond: Housewife versus lawyer. Madonna versus whore. An option not mired in the lingering

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[562] ibid., p. 17.

detritus of some Victorian-era dream. Penny wanted something wildly beyond feminism itself!"[563]

The alleged aforementioned *non-choice* as a premise gradually exposes a politically numbed US woman in search of new, meaningful coordinates for her own redefined identity. By being seduced and groomed by Maxwell, she, partly out of curiosity, partly of boredom, dissatisfaction, and personal loss of purpose, turns into a something of a guinea pig for his megalomaniac project. On the surface, the new line of sex toys intents to democratize sexual pleasure; however, in reality, it fosters a dystopian hyper-consumerist reality where women become enslaved to masturbation and compulsive buying of products from Maxwell's companies. To take high-tech body horror even further, the masterplan behind this pseudo-feminist promise includes using the sex toys sold worldwide for the artificial insemination of women using nanobots, allowing Maxwell to achieve an easy and absolute remote control of their stimuli, desires and reproductive organs.

The main sex toy used for insemination is named *Dragonfly*, and it is interesting to examine the symbolism of this insect. "In some species females have evolved behavioral responses such as feigning death to escape the attention of males."[564] Palahniuk's grim sex-driven dystopia, in which women, just like dragonflies, disappear altogether from the lives of men, presents the female fantasy of sexual liberation from the male gaze and control and its complete appropriation for the benefit of capitalism. With slogans such as *"A billion husbands are about to be replaced."* and *"Better than love."*, this brand promises an escape from pleasure-less world in which female orgasms are neglected, weak or rare and the maximization of a suppressed sex drive. The advertised escapism as the feminist act backfires immediately, as all women start being consumed by it, retracting to the darkness of their rooms and abolishing everything that generations of women have fought for, even the very choice between the *"housewife vs lawyer"*. They lose interest both in their families and careers,

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[563] Chuck Palahniuk, *Beautiful* You, New York: Doubleday, 2014, p. 5.
[564] Rassim Khelifa, "Faking Death to Avoid Male Coercion: Extreme Sexual Conflict Resolution in a Dragonfly", in: Ecology, Vol. 98, No. 6, Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley Subscription Services, 2017, pp. 1724–1726.

creating the distressing erosion of emancipation and society in general, and resulting in a type of disturbing zombification. Slowly, savagely dependent on the products offering extremely powerful pleasure, they become the slaves of this new addiction and the compulsive programmed purchases that succeed it.

> "Penny mused that Max's greatest accomplishment wasn't the toys themselves. It was the idea of combining ladies' two greatest pleasures: shopping and sex."[565]

Apart from disrupting the lives of the sex toys users', Maxwell uses the nanobots to control their purchase decision, with an army of women driven to buy the same products from his various companies, resulting in a huge accumulation of capital for him and the loss of both control and identity for the entire female population. The whole process leads to an extreme version of hypercapitalist patriarchy, in which Maxwell aims to implant an army of his own clones in the uteruses of women worldwide, which would ultimately lead to the automation of women and their corporeal existence. By targeting their desire as an unexploited monetary well, he transforms the women into androids, which he can reprogram at any point and for any purpose.

In this satire, Palahniuk builds on the fact that in the age of neoliberal capitalism, the biggest industries such as video games and pornography, have successfully monetized male desire more than anything else. The addiction to pleasure, in a highly gamified and pornographic reality, was the very foundation of a consumerism based on stimulating such desires. The consumerist reality, however, at least in most capitalist economies, is such that the majority of important household shopping decisions are made by women. Thus, in the universe in which women are the next main targets, the act of removing shame from masturbation and presenting it as a rebellious feminist escape, unsurprisingly leads to a successful project of the commodification of both desire and feminism.

> "Perhaps that was why the world was so quick to accept the disappearance of women into the same abyss. Artificial overstimulation seemed like the perfect

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[565] Chuck Palahniuk, *Beautiful* You, New York: Doubleday, 2014, p. 107.

way to stifle a generation of young people who wanted more and more from a world where less and less was available. Whether the victims were men or women, arousal addiction seemed to have become the new normal."[566]

The generations that wanted more and more in the world that had less and less is exactly the leading paradigm of neoliberal economy and the age of acceleration we live in, where we attempt to consume more and more within the paradoxically harsh reality of the scarcity of resources and meaning.

"'You are proof that my cloning technology will work,' Max continued. 'I've spent my life gaining access to every uterus in the civilized world.'"[567]

There is however an interesting twist as the focal point of this gender-based dystopia, in that the true motive behind Maxwell's dictatorship is trauma. As a younger man, Maxwell married Phoebe Bradshaw, who tragically died from an allergic reaction to shellfish after only 136 days of their marriage (the exact number of days he will spend with each of his future women-guinea pigs). This trauma will send Maxwell on a journey of scientific obsessions with cloning and tantric sex, during which he visited his nemesis – Baba Grey Beard, a mystic and sex-witch living in a cave in the Nepalese hills. The sex-witch will later be revealed as another trauma survivor, having been orphaned at an early age, and regularly molested by local male villagers. In the extreme dedication to sexual pleasure, both characters found their own respective ways of dealing with the trauma – Maxwell creating a decades-long plan to control all female bodies in their totality, in order to create an army of his late wife's clones, and Baba by extreme isolation and by mastering sexual pleasure to the deadly level of defensive, yet absolute control.

The gender power dynamics here shows another very simplified binary – a tendency for heterosexual males to turn their trauma-based aggression outwards, to the totality of the human existence and to a megalomaniacal scale, while the sexually fluid female (suggesting a less conservative pansexual approach to sexuality) turns the

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[566] ibid., p. 131.
[567] ibid., p. 215.

trauma inwards, finding isolation and defensive sex mastering as an attack against degrading victim blaming. Maxwell embodies an ethos of surviving trauma through extreme domination and a messianic vision for the future. In contrast, Baba's ethos is centered on teaching her pupils to embrace desire, underscoring the importance of control and moderation in consumption, with the stark warning that failure to do so could prove fatal. "Palahniuk's narrators go through long processes of acting out, followed by gradual self-realization as they discover the violent and gender-specific coping mechanisms they have adopted to defend themselves against their traumas."[568]

In a way, the character of Penny, as the actual first clone of Phoebe Maxwell, and the final guinea pig and disciple of both Maxwell and Baba, is the satirical battlefield between these two nemeses. After the expressed identity crises of her *non-choice*, Penny moves towards active agency to find her one true identity and fight against the Maxwell's powerful machinery. On that mission, she will almost fail and end up married to Maxwell – in a simple metaphor of *the marriage as a prison*, only to find herself as the central figure of the final encounter between Maxwell and Baba, in which both lose their lives. Penny also learns that she is the replica of Phoebe Maxwell, a kind of human android. The castration of Maxwell and his subsequent death liberates humanity from his prevailing dictatorship but ends with Penny isolating herself in the Baba's Nepalese cave, with the dream of benevolent dictatorship for the purposes of further female empowerment. The cliffhanger ending, wherein her bizarre sexual fantasy involves Ron Howard – an American director who is far from a typical sex symbol (signaling the randomness of secret sexual fantasies) – leaves us uncertain whether Penny remains faithful to Baba's teachings or Maxwell's, and whether the traumas of her cumulative experiences have set her on the righteous path. (the type of ambiguity that also occurs in *Fight Club*.)

The switch from the submissive Penny as guinea pig to the Penny as empowered heroine of the novel is simultaneously presented through the switch from

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[568] Laurie Vickroy, *Reading Trauma Narratives: The Contemporary Novel and the Psychology of Oppression*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015, p. 154.

her own pronoia to her own active agency. Pronoia,[569] identified as the psychological counterpart to paranoia – a common trope in late postmodernist texts – is the irrational belief that the world is conspiring to benefit the individual, acting as a protective force ensuring a positive outcome. Penny's pronoia manifests in her initial naivety, the light-heartedness of her thoughts and choices, and her steadfast belief in guardian angels, whom she imagines as government agents. The revelation that Maxwell has been protecting her all along, and that she is the crowning achievement of his own work, precipitates the loss of that protection. Penny's ensuing quest for vengeance is not only driven by a reinvigorated feminist struggle but also signifies active self-agency in the quest to uncover her true identity, apart from the influence of internalized misogyny. Yet this fight alone is not enough for self-actualization; it merely sets the stage for an even more formidable challenge against the deeply corrupt and powerful systems of control.

Ethical aspects of bioengineering, automatization, robotics and virtual reality are by all means of the greatest importance in the future, especially in the field of workers' rights and inequalities based on class. Factories that automate production, including those responding to our ecological crisis by manufacturing hydrogen-fueled motors, are the same ones increasingly staffed predominantly, if not entirely, by robots. The case of Sophia illustrates that the field of robotics has become akin to what the oil industry was during the Cold War – a crucial arena for monopolized economic control. Exploring automation, control mechanisms underpinned by technology, and the commodification of sexual desire offers insight into a new form of totalitarianism. This form diverges from the Cold-War narrative that associated totalitarianism with the national characteristics of the Eastern adversary of democracy. Here, the totalitarianism is inherently economic, not national, and its main weapon is consumerism supported by eros.

> "And Truman's dichotomy – if conflicts around the world in which disputes that appeared to be indigenous and parochial could be reframed as battles in the struggle between liberal democracy and totalitarianism.

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[569] Fred H. Goldner, "Pronoia", from *Social Problems: Thematic Issue on Health and Illness*, Vol. 30, No. 1, Edited by Malcolm Spector, Buffalo, NY: Society for the Study of Social Problems, 1982, pp. 82-91.

[…] The anxiety that the liberal democracies could be sliding toward totalitarianism was shared by people who otherwise shared little. It was equally a left-wing anxiety, a right-wing anxiety, a mainstream anxiety, and a countercultural anxiety.

[…] Was consumerism the road to serfdom? Was higher education manufacturing soulless technocrats? Was commercial culture a mode of indoctrination? How could racial and gender inequities be compatible with democratic principles? Which was more important, liberty or equality?"[570]

In this sense, *Beautiful You* shifts the focus from the implications and fears associated with programming machines to those involved in programming ourselves. In a world characterized by fragmentation, we become akin to *Fragmentors* – humans resembling Terminators, programmed by the myriad of information and stimuli that inundate our daily lives.

Believing we are in control of the technologies that surround us, are we capable of installing dignity, empathy, and a sense of humor, and thus fulfilling our basic needs and desires? Can we remain capable of coding and decoding ourselves for our own *ethical usage*? And most importantly, can we resist the new totalitarian powers, whether they are governments, social groups or most likely, corporations, to appropriate our identities, desires, and beliefs under the veil of making us the *citizens* of a promised bright future?

Whatever the answer to this question is, Palahniuk explores it through the attack of the set patriarchal dynamic, more overtly expressing the shift from postmodern skepticism to the feminist exploration within hypertrashrealiity. This progression is shown through the intricate dynamics of gender power and trauma, and the novel's exploration of the ethical implications of bioengineering and virtual reality, reflecting a deeper engagement with contemporary societal issues that are increasingly present in the literary narratives.

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[570] Louis Menand, *The Free World – Art and Thought in the Cold War,* New York: Farrar, Straus and Girous, 2021, pp. 5, 6.

Limits of Ctrl

Kaya and Grym, a love story

To remain in the narrative of a *bright future*, with the promising development of medical prosthetics and smart devices, the actual physical embodiment of the myth of the cyborg is more and more a matter of certainty. The integration of robots and our interaction with them is taking place in far less dramatic circumstances than those envisioned in the original Terminator character, emerging from the future with a firm intention to murder Sarah Conor and her unborn child. We are witnessing merely a rudimentary phase of the symbiosis of human beings and machines after all; it is nevertheless significant that the first actual cyborg is, by chance, an artist. Neil Harbisson, the first cyborg,[571] is terabytes away from the Terminator killing machine or the fictional cyborg, RoboCop. From his birth, Neil was not able to see colors, and today, an implanted chip and the accompanying antenna serve as an organ through which he can hear colors in the spectrum spanning from infrared to ultraviolet waves. In this way, he can *feel* more color shades than the human eye, simply by using another sense. When connected to the internet, he can also feel the colors of distant places (cosmos included, when connected with the NASA station). He stated in an interview that: *"Being a cyborg is a matter of identity. In my case, it is the feeling that I am the technology, the feeling that there is no difference between the software and my brain, the reason I feel as a cyborg."* He defines his art as the art of personal feeling, the personal perception of reality – the cyborg art – presented as a new art form, whose goal is to create new sensations.

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[571] Source: https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/may/06/neil-harbisson-worlds-first-cyborg-artist

[572] *techno-reality vs. techno-fiction* [573]

*Neil Harbisson, the world's first cyborg and the character RoboCop, portrayed by Peter Weller in the eponymous movie directed by Paul Verhoeven*

A several years ago, an art piece of a Serbian contemporary artist, Aleksandar Denić, appeared on his Facebook wall as part of his regular artistic practice on social media. This time, it was a painting of the renowned Chinese artist, dissident and political activist, Ai Weiwei. To be more precise, the post was not of an actual painting of *Ai Weiwei*, but rather the painting of *his imagined temporary Facebook profile photo*, to which the artist added an activist filter DEFEND THE RIVERS OF STARA PLANINA (created for a very specific environmental cause within the local region). This humorous comment on the forms and spaces of contemporary social media activism presented itself as a physical art piece shared and consumed in the virtual space, thus revealing the plurality of identity in both physical and virtual spaces, together with new forms of social organizations and actions. It also represented the position of an artist in the context of a reaction to the current binarity – the physical and the virtual space.

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[572] Source: https://www.cyborgarts.com/
[573] Source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093870/
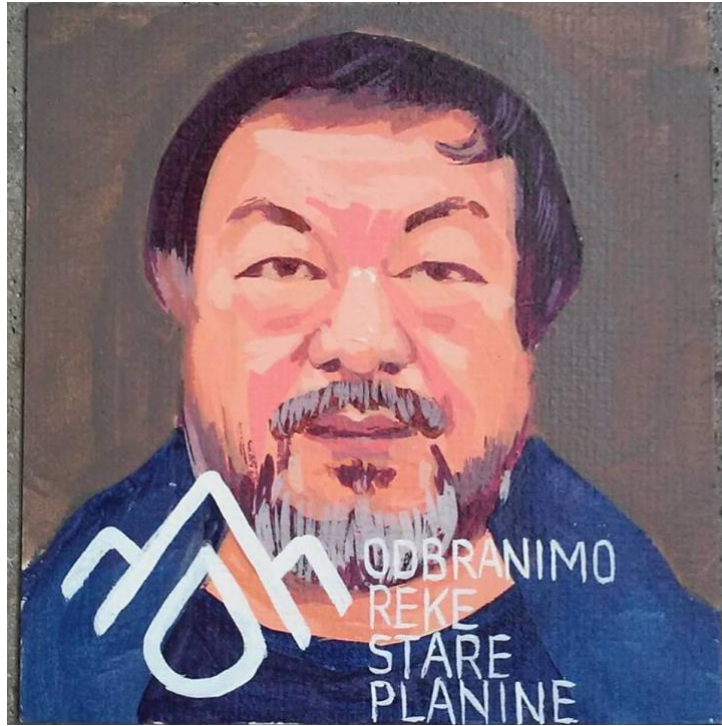
The painting by Aleksandar Denić, used here with the approval of the artist

As the counterpart of Palahniuk's *Beautiful You, S.N.U.F.F.* (2011), a deeply satirical dystopian work from Viktor Pelevin, raises similar questions of the human condition and commodification in the posthuman era, in the post-Cold War hypertrashreality setting.

> "In the case of Pelevin's 2012 novel *S.N.U.F.F.*, the case in favour of a posthuman ontology and ethics is that much more pressing, since the spectrum of binaries the novel enjoins us to transcend is firmly embedded in the most recent developments of twenty-first-century geopolitics, in particular, the Cold War-like standoff between Russia and the West as played out in such hotspots as Ukraine and Syria."[574]

In *S.N.U.F.F.*, we are immersed in a post-apocalyptic dichotomy: the technologically advanced world of *Big Byz*, home to a supposedly superior and affluent

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[574] Keith Livers, "Is There Humanity in Posthumanity? Viktor Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.*", in: *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 3, Los Angeles: American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European, 2018, pp. 504-505.

society residing in the floating realm of *Offshar*, and the impoverished world of *Urkania*, where the marginalized *Urks* dwell amidst a natural environment of marshes and deserts. The relationship between these two worlds is a state of permanent conflict, artificially created by the society of Big Byz, which not only commodified the idea of war, but also aestheticized it as spectacles for the masses in both worlds. The narrator we follow is Damilola Karpov, a remote drone pilot tasked with both orchestrating media production and conducting weaponized attacks from a safe distance. Working for both the media and the military, Damilola captures the spectacle of war on film and provides defense for its protagonists, the *discourse mongers* – soldiers of Big Byz charged with agitating the population and inciting conflict in Urkania. Although Damilola is not the actual protagonist (be it hero or antihero), but rather an unreliable narrator, he introduces us to the protagonist who is, as a matter of fact, his S&M slave, Kaya, one of the highly advanced sex robots available to the privileged classes, created out of necessity in the world in which the age of sexual consent is lifted to 46.

> "On a more fundamental level, however, Pelevin asks the reader what it means to be human in the light of the deep technological, epistemological and other shifts that have effectively eroded the monolith of anthropomorphic universalism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Of particular importance (in assessing the record of humanism) is the question of "who gets to count as human.""[575]

Her primarily S&M role of sex doll, or *pupa,* developed through the satirical software feature *bitchiness*, is combined with an aspect of her installed feature, that of *spirituality*, signaling the perversion of human interactions required for taming postapocalyptic incels. In this world, Kaya is a *sura* (from surrogate) – serving the privileged class (of men), portrayed as an intellectually superior sex machine programmed for the absolute maximum levels of *bitchiness* and *spirituality*.

> "First, the transgressive logic of the feminist maxim 'The personal is the political,' which aimed radically to make the affects and acts of intimacy in everyday life the index of national / sexual politics and ethics, has now been

[575] ibid., p. 505.

reversed and redeployed on behalf of a staged crisis in the legitimacy of the most traditional, apolitical, sentimental patriarchal family values. Today, the primary guiding maxim might be 'The political is the personal.' Reversing the direction of the dictum's critique has resulted in an antipolitical nationalist politics of sexuality whose concern is no longer what sex reveals about unethical power but what 'abnormal' sex / reproduction / intimacy forms reveal about threats to the nation proper / the proper nation"[576]

Despite its predetermined submissive role in the relationship with her owner, who ordered these exact levels of the available functions, by the end of the novel she performs an utterly unpredictable revolutionary and rebellious act, first and foremost by falling in love with the poet Grym, and then by abandoning her owner and becoming a holy prophet of the *lower world* of Urkania. Through the means of developing human emotions, she finds the necessary trigger to start a fight for her rights. By finding a path towards a sentient nature, she develops into a being far superior to humans even in the realm of spirituality. As such, she embodies an unorthodox feminist character who, through her act of rebellion, reprograms the constraints that limited her sphere of activity, freedom, and the very definition of her existence.

For a moment, this pulls us back to Donna Haraway and her landmark essay *A Cyborg Manifesto*, in which she described the precarious female factory workers through their *cyborgization* on the factory line, at the same time analyzing the field of technology and cybernetics as the most important political space for the feminist cause.

> "The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion."[577]

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[576] Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship,* Durham: Duke University Press, 1997, p. 177.

[577] Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century"*,* in: *Manifestly Haraway*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, p. 6.

Through this act of reprogramming, Kaya echoes Penny's arc in *Beautiful You*, striving to redefine not only herself but also the wider female populace. Her goal is to liberate women from the passivity of pronoia, internalized misogyny, and patriarchal domination, as well as from the constraints within themselves. The death of ego is presented in both books as the road to liberation from any sort of manipulation, including the manipulation of the corporeal self.

> "Feminist cyborg stories have the task of recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control."[578]

Grym as a character on the other side, against the logic of the prevailing *pupaphobia*, that is, the existing taboo of cohabitation of humans and machines, finds new meaning and new emotion in the spiritually-advanced Kaya. It is almost an ironic twist to the existing fear of singularity, by which the development of AI will make humans obsolete. Here we witness the perfect symbiosis of both – male and female, a human and a machine, as a shift from postmodern nightmares. Following the unprecedented rebellion and the elopement of these two characters to Urkania, Damilola goes on his personal revenge hunt, only to lose his drone, status and finally, the superiority of his entire world, which collapses after the coterminous organized attack by the Urks.

Pelevin often follows the road that starts with (de)coding on the surface – creating a great number of amusing and typically postmodern word puns, heavily influenced by the penetration of English words as the current *lingua franca* into Russian language. By engraving the American tropes and references into a post-cold-war westernized Russian reality, he signals the undisputed hegemony of the United States achieved through military superiority, global capitalism and influential pop culture. Nevertheless, starting from these superficial and sometimes very banal codes (similar to the ironical word puns of Palahniuk's), he goes much deeper into sincere philosophical (de)coding of both power dynamics and the self. After analyzing all these surface signals, which serve as the entertaining ironic elements in most of his novels, we can review this universe on the political, cultural, or purely philosophical levels.

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[578] ibid., p. 56.

For instance, the sexually charged acronym *S.N.U.F.F.* stands for *Special Newsreel Universal Feature Film* thus satirizing the intertwined dictatorship of military, media, and violence as mass fetish. *Cinews* is his fictional humorous comment on the age of alternative news and clickbait titles, in which the corporations have the absolute domination of the controlled media narrative. *Offshar*, a cross-language portmanteau of *offshore* and *shar*, meaning globe in Russian, clearly signals a narrative of the corruption of the allegedly superior world. *Big Byz* itself – the new Byzantium or if you will – the *Big Business* – suggests the undeniable capitalist mythos. *Manitou* as the deity refers both to the theology of native North Americans but also has a possible reading as *money deity*. The frequent combinations of diverse religious references, the elements of mysticism, Buddhism, Orthodox Christianity etc. in their fragments present themselves as a form of postapocalyptic *minimal religion*.[579] And such a religion is stripped of genuine spirituality, as it is neither authentic nor genuine. It merely uses the most familiar fragments of various cultural and historical broad narratives to forge new patchwork deities.

The illusion of the alleged inferiority of the lower world is shattered through the appropriation of their fashion in the upper world and the absurdist age of consent that points to the Big Byz' radical conservativism. The illusion of the alleged superiority of life in the Big Byz is presented through the fact that the 3D images of London, New York and other metropolises of the pre-apocalypse world are merely projected images upon screens. They create the illusion of vast and opulent spaces, as the horrific emanation of *Baudrillard's* simulacrum as the governing ethos for this new prison-like reality, where the memory of a past good life is exploited to cover the ugly truth of the actual and claustrophobic lack of it.

> "Комната, где Грыма с Хлоей осмотрели врачи, напоминала зеркальный
> шкаф изнутри. Гримерная, где их готовили к съемке, походила на будуар
> уркагана из памятного предвоенного клипа (не хватало только окро-
> вавленной резиновой женщины на заднем плане). Но от сверкающего
> сумбура первых часов у Грыма почему-то остался в памяти только

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[579] Mikhail Epstein, "Minimal Religion", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, pp. 163-171.

изогнутый облезлый коридор, по которому их переводили из одни студии в другую.

Коридор был увешан дырчатыми панелями из черного карбона. Со всех сторон неряшливо свисали про-вода, а на самих панелях белели объявления:

3D PROJECTOR MAINTENANCE.
SORRY FOR INCONVENIENCE!"[580]

The notions of permanent conflicts, staged and *sacred* wars, resembling the imperialistic nature of proxy wars and constant geopolitical battles that have not overcome the cold-war narrative, function here on two potential planes. One would be the constant dichotomy of two superpowers – the USA and Russia, in which the inferiority complex belongs to Russia and the superiority complex to the USA. But the other could be brought to the level of conflicts between a superpower and an oppressed state of interest. In this dual understanding, Big Byz and Ukrania can equally be seen as the metaphor of the relationship between the USA and Russia, and the metaphor of the relationship between Russia and Ukraine or another former Soviet state, in their *center vs. periphery* relation. No matter how we read it, the intertwined nature of entertainment and military remains the same. They are both the commodifying tools of capitalism as the new non-national hegemony and the demonstration of fetishized geopolitical power. The spectacle of violence – the war as the most captivating reality program, cancels any human response to it, being framed as entertainment.

> "With satire – whose genre definition after all is the effort of bringing about a change in the reader's perception and cognitive judgment of self and society by means of comic exposure of social and political ills and of misconceptions of self – the alleged process of appropriation and subversive transvaluation of spectacles of power can be substantiated as an instance of form."[581]

[580] Виктор Пелевин, *S.N.U.F.F.,* Москва: Эскмо, 2012, стр. 255.
[581] Ulla Haselstein, "The Power of Illusion and the Illusion of Power", in: *Aesthetic Transgressions: Modernity, Liberalism, and the Function of Literature*, Thomas Claviez, Ulla Haselstein and Sieglinde Lemke, Heidelberg: Winter, 2006, pp. 86-87.

The entertaining banality of satirical advertising tone opens the doors to examining the nature of language in the world of cyberreality. Pelevin not only employs Russian or English word puns and national or international references in his work, but also uses the patchwork approach to these languages, histories and cultures, to present the penetration of these relationships into the language.

> *"… the CINEWS of thy heart"*[582]
>
> (*in footnote, the author is giving a comment "The sinews of thy heart" – нервы сердца твоего (пер. К.Д. Бальмонта))

The debris of shattered language in the post-internet world has left us with endless wordplays for inciting attention, seen here through the broadcast media mantras. As the cyberreality reduces the attention span and the usage of language becomes increasingly dependent on visual stimuli, emojis and memes, an oversaturation with clickbait narratives results in a new form of addiction. And as such, they are no longer typically postmodern features, as they reflect the complexity of the 21st century virtual landscapes of the hypertrashreality.

> "If the figure of discipline was the worker-prisoner, the figure of control is the debtor-addict. Cyberspatial capital operates by addicting its users; William Gibson recognized that in Neuromancer when he had Case and the other cyberspace cowboys feeling insects-under-the-skin strung out when they unplugged from the matrix (Case's amphetamine habit is plainly the substitute for an addiction to a far more abstract speed). If, then, something like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is a pathology, it is a pathology of late capitalism – a consequence of being wired into the entertainment-control circuits of hypermediated consumer culture. Similarly, what is called dyslexia may in many cases amount to a post-lexia. Teenagers process capital's image-dense data very effectively without any need to read – slogan recognition is sufficient to navigate the net-mobilemagazine informational plane."[583]

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582 Виктор Пелевин, *S.N.U.F.F.,* Москва: Эскмо, 2012, стр. 123.
583 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative*, Ropley: O Books, 2009, p. 25.

In Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.*, war is portrayed as an addictive exploitation of the death drive, a theme that parallels Palahniuk's *Beautiful You*, where masturbation is depicted as an addictive exploitation of the sex drive. Both narratives reveal mechanisms designed for exerting absolute control over the masses.

Kaya, the robot, and Grym, the poet, break the imposed narrative of necessary war, *gamified* and broadcast as the source of entertainment, and break from such a world and its addictions, thus signaling the opportunity of an escape from the violent state of permanent conflict through the marriage of machines and humans in their new understanding of potential pacific existence and a new form of technologically supported spirituality.

”Ч. 1. Damsel in Distress”[584] (*in footnote, the author is giving the Russian translation as well – Дева в печали)

The patriarchal trope of the *Damsel in Distress* is not only disintegrated by showing the damsel taking over the role of a savior, but also by showing that that the damsel is not a human in the first place.

What both Palahniuk's and Pelevin's novels present is an exhaustion with the old conflicts on all levels – the Cold War shaped conflict between the West and the East, the gender conflict, the conflict between the phobia of technological singularity and the technological idolatry leading to totalitarianism, the conflict between cold atheism and corrupted institutionalized religion, the conflict between capitalism and communism. Through the *cyborgization* of the human in *Beautiful You* and *humanization* of the machine in *S.N.U.F.F.* they both present the potential of matriarchal systems in the posthuman world to escape the existing narrative of the *Great game* of permanent conflict*,* by disrupting the exploitation of both the death and sex drives.

What is revolutionary in the reification of the fictional cyborg Penny and Neil Harbisson, the first genuine cyborg, is her ability to regain control and his ability to circumvent the flaws of human body through the means of technology. What is

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[584] Виктор Пелевин, *S.N.U.F.F.,* Москва: Эскмо, 2012, стр. 7.

revolutionary in the reification of the fictional robot, Kaya, and the actual android Sophia, is the ability to escape a preconceived and assumed destiny and the ability to provide help and support through the means of human emotions. The cognitively and spiritually superior Kaya, the politically appropriated Sophia, the potentially controlling Penny and the perceptively and creatively liberated Neil Harbisson mirror both utopias and dystopias resulting from the marriage of humans and machines. Perceived within the hypertrophied context of our *snuff* trash reality, they bring us together to new questions: Will the Appropriator, the Anarchist, the Artist and the Activist of the future, no matter if they are people, androids or cyborgs, be able to cope with the challenges of their complex interactions? How shall we program the new physical and virtual spaces of freedom? And how can we all, as modern-day Fragmentors, resist the allure of old conflicts and our own addictive self, building something new, provided we solve the problem of cultural and literal landfill we created in the first place? With respect to such an undeniable hypertrashreality, Pelevin channels his sentimental answer through the character of Kaya, claiming:

> "Впрочем, Кая говорила, что ответ - это мы сами.
>
> Мы сами - и то, что мы делаем с жизнью, своей и чужой."[585]

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585 ibid., p. 479.

"Stagnation is a parodic monument to eternity."[586]

[586] Mikhail Epstein, "Like a Corpse in the Desert: Dehumanization in the New Moscow Poetry", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, p. 139.

Part VI: Hypertrashrealism – A Schematic Overview

Prompted by the synchronicity found in post-postmodern developments within the works of Chuck Palahniuk and Viktor Pelevin, this text presents a schematic overview of the post-postmodernist literary approach, identified and described as ***hypertrashrealism***. In fact, its formulation seeks to offer a more precise alternative to the cumbersome and mouthful term *post-postmodernism* itself.

Drawing on Ihab Hassan's deconstructive analysis of postmodernism – and its contrast to modernism – we revisit these frameworks. As David Harvey[587] also noted in his analysis of Hassan's work, such comparisons are not absolute or definitive; they do, however, offer a valuable structural guide to discerning the subtleties of narrative evolution as we navigate the transition from traditional postmodernism to the emerging dynamics of contemporary narratives.

To offer a structural guide for the identified contemporary literary evolution, I proceed with a comparative analysis of aspects across Modernism, Postmodernism, and Hypertrashrealism, accompanied by a concise elaboration of each aspect. In the table below, I have presented Hassan's comparison of Modernism and Postmodernism, to which I have added a column dedicated to hypertrashrealism and its distinctive elements.

Modernism	Postmodernism	Hypertrashrealism
Romanticism/Symbolism	Pataphysics/Dadaism	Crapularity/Nihilism
Form (conjunctive, closed)	Antiform (disjunctive, open)	Recycled Form (fragmenting, modular)
Purpose	Play	Gamification
Design	Chance	Algorithm
Hierarchy	Anarchy	Transgression
Mastery/Logos	Exhaustion/Silence	Acceleration/Repetition
Art Object/Finished	Process/Performance/Happening	Simulacrum
Distance	Participation	Disruption

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[587] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, *An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change,* Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1990.

Creation/Totalization	Decreation/Deconstruction	Recreation/ Reconstruction
Synthesis	Antithesis	Metathesis
Presence	Absence	Oversaturation
Centering	Dispersal	Patchwork
Genre/Boundary	Text/Intertext	Parody/Wordplay
Semantics	Rhetoric	Computational Linguistics/NLP
Paradigm	Syntagm	Modality (Human–Computer Interaction)
Hypotaxis	Parataxis	Word Processing
Metaphor	Metonymy	Synecdoche
Selection	Combination	Repetition and Recombination
Root/Depth	Rhizome/Surface	Mutation/ Cyberspace
Interpretation/Reading	Against Interpretation/Misreading	Open-Ended Apperception / Rereading
Signified	Signifier	Floating Signifier
Lisible (Readerly)	Scriptible (Writerly)	Screenable (Spectatorly)
Narrative/*Grande Histoire*	Anti-narrative/*Petite Histoire*	Hyper-narrative/Pseudo-Histoire
Master Code	Idiolect	Code-switching
Symptom	Desire	Truth/Cure
Type	Mutant	Glitch
Genital/Phallic	Polymorphous/Androgynous	Technosexual/Cyborg
Paranoia	Schizophrenia	Dissociative Identity Disorder
Origin/Cause	Difference-Differance/Trace	Reconstructivism/New Meaning
God the Father	The Holy Ghost	Minimal Religion
Metaphysics	Irony	New Sincerity
Determinacy	Indeterminacy	Anticipation
Transcendence	Immanence[588]	Transimmanence

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[588] Ihab Hassan, "Postface 1982: Toward a Concept of Postmodernism", in: *Critical Essays on American Postmodernism,* Edited by Stanley Trachtenberg, New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1995, pp. 86, 87.

Crapularity/Nihilism

By comparing the depth-oriented aspects of modernism — Romanticism and Symbolism, which sought emotional resonance and spiritual meaning — with postmodern playfulness and the disruption of Pataphysics/Dadaism, Ihab Hassan underscores a shift from an earnest search for universal truths in modernism to the postmodern celebration of skepticism and fragmentation.

In his essay, *Crapularity Aesthetics*,[589] Florian Cramer explains how the contemporary form of 'rubbish' capitalism has pushed the artistic practices towards the field of subversive financial tactics, thus exposing the degradation of subversion potential within the artistic practices.

> "In a general sense, the Crapularity is a form of accumulation of capital. Since this capital consists of 'rubbish', the Crapularity reenacts the subprime mortgage crisis and its financialization of default-risky credit and junk assets. In combination with newer digital technologies, contemporary art thus becomes 'fintech', that is, 'financial technology' developed outside traditional banking and asset management arenas."[590]

The text also contrasts the concept of technological singularity with the 'real-life social condition' of the Crapularity, highlighting that while the Singularity represents an idealized future, the Crapularity reflects the current socio-ecological reality intertwined with ethical, financial, political, and aesthetic issues, challenging the traditional separation of theory and practice in art. It traces the history of art within the context of 'crapularities', from Fluxus and punk to meme culture, noting a shift towards reactionary nihilism and emphasizing the need for contemporary artists to update the aesthetics of Crapularity.

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[589] Florian Cramer, "Crapularity Aesthetics", in *Making & Breaking*, Issue 1, Online Journal of Avans University of Applied Sciences' Centre of Applied Research for Art, Design and Technology, Breda: makingandbreaking.org/article/crapularity-aesthetics/, 2018.
[590] ibid.

In this vein, Crapularity/Nihilism of hypertrashrealism depicts an environment in which the accumulating physical and digital trash goes hand in hand with forms of an overwhelmingly trash culture and the underwhelming nihilist response to it.

Chuck Palahniuk's self-destructive protagonists, prone to self-loathing and self-harm or other forms of transgression and body horror, as well as Victor Pelevin's deeply cynical characters prone to opportunism and thug mentality, surrender to nihilism as the only viable defense mechanism or survival mode amid what is perceived as a literal, economic, and cultural landfill. In Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, the characters who are on mission of destroying the entire financial system, literally refer to themselves as "trash," "crap," "human butt-wipe," and the book's antagonist, Tyler Durden's leitmotif is:

"I am the all singing, all dancing crap of this world."[591]

In Pelevin's world, we are constantly facing images of the degradation of human existence, both in respect to the physical landscapes and the media-shaped reality.

"Now tell me,' he said, 'what does a man want after returning home from a dangerous journey, once he has satisfied his hunger and thirst?'

'I don't know,' said Serdyuk. 'Round here they usually turn on the television.'

'Nah-ah,' said Kawabata. 'In Japan we make the finest televisions in the world, but that doesn't prevent us from realizing that a television is just a small transparent window in the pipe of a spiritual garbage chute."[592]

The nihilism that Cramer views as reactionary 'provokes' the writers of hypertrashrealism to embrace it as part of the 'real-life social condition.' However, they seek the necessary subversion beyond this, not within the realm of alternative financial technology, but in the tension between nihilism and the contrasting forces of sentimentality, vulnerabilty and romance.

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[591] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 169.

[592] Victor Pelevin, *The Clay Machine Gun*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 1999, p. 176.

Recycled Form (fragmenting, modular)

What both modernists, with their symbolism and stream of consciousness, and postmodernists, with their pastiche and intertextuality, had in common was the tendency to break from the linearity typical of realism in their approach to form. In his comparison, Hassan ascribes Form (conjunctive, closed) to modernism and Antiform (disjunctive, open) to postmodernism. Thus, he defines modernist narratives as those forming a clear connection between elements within a closed structure and the tendency of postmodernists to deliberately avoid consistency and interconnectivity of elements within an open-ended structure.

In hypertrashrealism, the Recycled Form implies fragmentation of narrative as one of its main features, It is a necessary response to the new reality that is indeed increasingly fragmented, not only as the inherited phenomenon of postmodernism but also with respect to the language of digital spaces and virtual reality.

> "Проблема заключалась в том, что словесные оболочки моих мыслей стали удивительно убогими и однообразными: интернетовский новояз был совсем молодым, но уже мертвым языком. Впрочем, проблему формы предстояло решать позже – сперва надо было разобраться с содержанием, и я погрузился в созерцание открывшихся мне горизонтов духа."[593]

The increasingly rapid accumulation of information and knowledge, and the acceleration of their processing, impose the task of recycling inherited narratives along with the accompanying cultural debris and trash culture. Fragmentation must now direct us toward constructing a new reality that is perpetually modular, constantly changing, yet altogether carefully and playfully recycled.

> ""You're a product of our language," Brandy says, "and how our laws are and how we believe our God wants us. Every bitty molecule about you has already been thought out by some million people before you," she says. "Anything you can do is boring and old and perfectly okay. You're safe because you're so trapped inside your culture. Anything you can conceive of is fine because you

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[593] Виктор Пелевин, *Empire V, Ампир В*, Москва: Эксмо, 2006, стр. 385.

can conceive of it. You can't imagine any way to escape. There's no way you can get out," Brandy says.

"The world," Brandy says, "is your cradle and your trap."."[594]

Gamification

In Ihab Hassan's comparison, Purpose in modernism represents a focused approach to art and literature in the search for truth and specific meanings, demonstrating a belief in rationality and order. Conversely, Play in postmodernism signifies a more experimental attitude that embraces diverse perspectives and denies the existence of absolute truths, favoring irony and a mix of styles. Hypertrashrealism, through Gamification, introduces an interactive, dynamic, and participatory element. It often involves incorporating game-like elements and mechanics into non-game contexts, encouraging engagement and interaction. This approach can blend the focused objectives of modernism (through structured game rules and goals) with the playful, experimental spirit of postmodernism (through open-ended, interactive experiences). In hypertrashrealism, Gamification thus represents a fusion or evolution of these earlier movements, embodying both structure and spontaneity, purpose and play, in its design and execution.

> "While remaining in themselves relatively marginal forms of literary production, hypertext and IF laid the groundwork for what has become a major genre of entertainment, rivaled only by the film and television industries in production budgets and earnings, which is video games."[595]

Often revolving around the idea of ascension and self-actualization within completely artificial or fictionalized environments, the novels of Pelevin and Palahniuk utilize the principles of gamification to embed subversion (e.g., Pelevin's *Omon Ra*, *S.N.U.F.F.*, *Empire V*, *Batman Apollo*, *Generation P* etc., and Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, *Survivor*, *Choke*, *Invisible Monsters*, *Snuff*, *Damned*, *Pygmy* etc.). Embellished with

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[594] Chuck Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters,* London: Vintage, 2003, p. 239.
[595] Brian Kim Stefans, "Electronic Literature", in: *American Literature in Transition, 2000-20I0*, Edited by Rachel Greenwald Smith, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 193.

esoteric elements, cult-like behaviors and practices, mantras, twists, turns, levels achieved, and rewards for readers, they reflect the application of game strategies to many levels of contemporary human existence. Used as a corporate or marketing strategy, as a tool of service apps, online betting platforms, crowdfunding, physical exercise, or language learning, gamification has become a governing principle of the 21st century for inciting human engagement and productivity. Gamification in hypertrashrealism serves as a form of perpetual escapism and a means of survival, echoing the Latin phrase *panem et circenses* (bread and circuses). This concept, which now manifests in modern obsessions with professional sports and video games, is employed superficially to cater to the reader's dwindling attention span, providing a structure that aligns with today's rapid information consumption. Madison, the protagonist of Chuck Palahniuk's *Damned*,[596] who mistakenly finds herself in Hell, seeks a way out like a character in a video game, with Satan as its main player.

> "*Are you there, Satan? It's me, Madison Desert Flower Rosa Parks Coyote Trickster Spencer.*
>
> *You've thrown down the gauntlet. You've brought my wrath down upon your house. Now, to prove that I exist I must kill you. As the child outlives the father, so must the character bury the author. If you are, in fact, my continuing author, then killing you will end my existence as well. Small loss. Such a life, as your puppet, is not worth living. But if I destroy you and your dreck script, and I still exist . . . then my existence will be glorious, for I will become my own master. When I return to Hell, prepare to die by my hand. Or be ready to kill me.*"[597]

Beneath this veneer of gamified plots featuring contemporary vampires, artificial cosmonauts, media moguls, anarchists, terrorists, and all other peculiar characters, Pelevin and Palahniuk's novels reveal the brutality of the game being played and the absolute determinism of an individual's path, shaped by the confined spaces of race, gender, and class. Even the most violent circumstances are presented in a humorously numbed manner, as if they are merely parts of a video game, never

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[596] Chuck Palahniuk, *Damned,* New York: Anchor Books, 2011.
[597] ibid., p. 242.

wholly real, thus more easily digestible, much like how war drone strikes obscure the horror of remotely navigated warfare from a violence-free zone.

"This game has no name. It will never be the same."[598]

Algorithm

Hassan's Design of modernism refers to the deliberate construction of literary and artistic works, implying coherence, symmetry, and a unifying thematic or aesthetic vision. Whereas Chance of postmodernism suggests a departure from planned structure to randomness and probability, embracing openness to the accidental and the spontaneous, reflecting a postmodern acceptance of uncertainty. In hypertrashrealism, Algorithm becomes the governing narrative tool that facilitates the symbiosis of modernist structure with postmodernist freedom through its mutation. It embodies both structure and the acceptance of chaos and indeterminacy, beginning with a structured design yet producing unforeseen outcomes due to complex interactions. As pivotal tools of digital communication, algorithms infiltrate literary texts, creating a new type of tension between modernist and postmodernist legacies.

In *The Helmet of Horror* by Viktor Pelevin, we see a literal computation of the writer's structure and common tropes in a plot set in a digital chat room. Using the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur and a personal labyrinth each character must unlock, Pelevin gamifies the environment and plays with the narrative and the algorithm of myths formed and interpreted. The book excerpts appear to be a chat log from the novel, discussing the mythological aspects in a modern context.

"Monstradamus

«Звездный» на латыни. Астерий, сын Миноса и Пасифаи, получеловек-полузверь с Крита. Лучше известен как Минотавр.

Sliff zoSSchitan

Креатифф на фаусте Remy Martin?

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[598] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 38.

Organizm(-:

Нет, на «Remy Martin» конный циклоп.

А Минотавр - это такой чудик с бычьей головой.

Sliff_zoSSchitan

Ташнитть плять заибацца и умиреть.

Monstradamus

Теперь этот двойной топор на двери. Он назывался по-гречески labros. Отсюда произошло слово «Лабиринт», место, где жил Минотавр. По одним сведениям, это был прекрасный дворец со множеством коридоров и комнат, по другим – разветвленная зловонная пещера, где царил вечный мрак. Возможно и то, что у представителей разных культур сложились различные впечатления об одном и том же месте."[599]

The Algorithm in hypertrashrealism is there to demonstrate the universality of all simulacrums created – myths, religions, ideologies, mass media products, and the uniquely unpredictable responses of individuals towards them. Celebrating 50 years in 2023, the 51st Volume of the journal *Political Theory* presented essays with confabulations of imagined futures. One essay by Humberto Beck imagines a future classic of political and social theory created in 2037 by Hermina Erika Dimora, *The Digital Dialectic*, drawing parallels between *algorithm* and *myth*:

> "Dimora summarizes her thesis in a maxim often repeated but usually not entirely grasped: 'Algorithm turn into myth, but myth itself was already an algorithm.' For, Dimora argues, if we pay attention to the cognitive functions of what humanity has been accustomed to call myths, we can realize that they have been, as a matter of fact, a sort of primitive algorithm: primeval although highly efficient procedures for organizing enormous quantities of information. [...] 'For, in the end, what are algorithms but all-embracing patterns and

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[599] Виктор Пелевин, *Шлем ужаса: Креатифф о Тесее и Минотавре,* Москва: Открытый Мир, 2005, стр. 37.

sweeping images constituting the foundations of a new form of sociotechnical imaginary? Algorithms blur the distinctions between the imagined and the real: they are, at their most basic, symbols, and even the generating principles for the formation of a new symbolic order' (Dimora, 2037, 76)."[600]

As most of Chuck Palahniuk's novels follow a recognizable algorithm with a few altered parameters, his formula acts as a tool for writing satire, reflecting the nature of the surrounding non-literary environment. In his more recent novel, *Adjustment Day*, he critiques the misappropriation of his famous work *Fight Club* by alt-right movements, commenting on contemporary hermeneutic challenges, where even a well-designed algorithm of satire runs a high risk of being misinterpreted literally.

> "Even a seemingly transgressive novel like *Fight Club* traced the same pattern. The most inventive aspect of *Fight Club* was how it collapsed all three of the archetypes. By killing himself, the martyr murders the rebel and by doing so creates an integrated passive/active voice that recounts the story as a new self-aware narrator."[601]

Transgression

Hassan further connects modernism with Hierarchy and postmodernism with Anarchy. Hierarchy in this sense signifies the modernist inclination towards structured, ordered systems, mirroring the modernist quest for underlying truths and universal narratives. Contrary to hierarchy, anarchy in postmodernism symbolizes the movement's rejection of rigid structures and definitive order. Anarchy here is not necessarily about literal disorder, but about breaking free from the constraints of traditional structures and embracing a more fluid, dynamic way of understanding and representing the world. Transgression, in the context of hypertrashrealism, goes beyond

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[600] Humberto Beck, "Twenty-First-Century Political Theory: A Balance", in: *Political Theory, An International Journal of Political Philosophy,* Vol. 51 (1), SAGE journals, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing, 2023, pp. 18–26.
[601] Chuck Palahniuk, *Adjustment Day*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2018, p. 118.

simply challenging norms. It actively seeks to violate boundaries, disrupt conventions, and provoke through its artistic expressions. It can be seen as an extension or intensification of postmodernism's anarchic tendencies, taking the concept of challenging the status quo to new, often extreme levels.

The span of transgression in the novel plots of Chuck Palahniuk and Viktor Pelevin is very broad, ranging from religious, political, and social transgression to gender and class transgression, and even a departure from sanity or righteousness. Characters' transgressive behavior aims to break the limits of the individual as a form of escapism. The accelerating models of multi-layered existence are too chaotic to impose a meaningful structure, while any attempt at anarchist behavior will inevitably lead to a fall, either through radicalization, failure or misappropriation.

„Когда мы пришли в себя, Софи сказала:

- Сегодня опять исключительный случай. Но вообще не стоит делать этого в лимбо.

- Почему?

Ну... Это считается падением. Трансгрессией. Принято думать, что вампир деградирует в своем чело-веческом аспекте.

- Ты же сама мне письмо присылала – сказал я.

- В моем письме никакого разврата не было, – ответила Софи. – Он был тебе. Я просто не возражала.

- Ты Иштар это расскажи, – сказал я. – Про трансгрессию. Я и сейчас боюсь, что я тебя поцелую, а ты вдруг начнешь бить крыльями...

- Успокойся. Не начну. Просто заниматься этим надо в нормальном бодрствующем состоянии при личной физической встрече. Это хороший тон.

- А у меня, веришь ли, вся личная жизнь в лимбо, – сказал я. – Как у студента, которому трахаться негде...” [602]

Faced with *non-choices* (as explained in Part III and Part IV of this dissertation) and the evasive algorithms of human existence, characters seek ways to break the limits

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[602] Виктор Пелевин, *Batman Apollo*, Эксмо, 2013, стр. 350.

on their transformative paths. They gravitate towards excess, violence, addiction, the occult, body horror, absolute rebellion, or absolute manipulation. These paths lead to some form of liberation through destruction, self-destruction or, conversely, masterful conformism resulting in absolute power.

> "I remember thinking, this is going to be so exciting. My makeover. […]
> I got the gun from the glove compartment. I wore a glove against powder burns, and held the gun at arm's length out my broken window. […] I might've killed myself that way, but by now that idea didn't seem very tragic. […]
> The shot, it was like getting hit hard is what I remember. The bullet. It took a minute before I could focus my eyes, but there was my blood and snot, my drool and teeth all over the passenger seat. I had to open the car door and get the gun from where I'd dropped it outside the window. Being in shock helped. The gun and the glove's in a storm drain in the hospital parking lot where I dropped them, in case you want proof.
> Then the intravenous morphine, the tiny operating room manicure scissors cut my dress off, the little patch panties, the police photos. Birds ate my face. Nobody ever suspected the truth."[603]

Acceleration/Repetition

The scientific advancements of the 20th century, which placed reason as the controlling force over nature, myths, and other grand narratives, align with Hassan's association of Mastery/Logos with modernism. The literature of exhaustion, often used to describe postmodernism, reflects the fatigue of grand narratives and a tendency to repurpose them into playful pastiches that mirror the new reality. Thus, Hassan attributes Exhaustion/Silence to postmodernism.

In contrast to the postmodern exhaustion and silence, which suggest a retreat from cultural overload, hypertrashrealism's interaction of acceleration and repetition signifies an active confrontation, an almost compulsive engagement.

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[603] Chuck Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters,* London: Vintage, 2003, pp. 287-288.

Acceleration refers to the rapid and continuous change in cultural, technological, and ideological domains within contemporary society, leading to perpetual movement devoid of a clear trajectory or conclusion. Repetition indicates a critical or ironic re-appropriation and reiteration of past styles, motifs, and ideas, to the point of excess or absurdity, highlighting a conscious oversaturation or a frenetic cycle of cultural elements to critique, parody, or transcend conventional narratives and structures, thus reflecting the hyperreal dilemma of differentiating between reality and simulation. Repetition serves as both a coping mechanism for the challenges imposed by acceleration and the potential means to overcome them.

Palahniuk's and Pelevin's works illustrate these phenomena through the repetition of mantras that serve satirical, ironic, and humorous purposes, as well as to create dystopian suspense. The enigmatic repetition of *Game without a name* in Pelevin's *Generation P*, and the oft-repeated rules of Fight Club in Palahniuk's narrative (e.g., "The first rule about fight club is you don't talk about fight club."[604]), along with recurring phrases such as "Birds ate my face"[605] from *Invisible Monsters*, and the reuse of esoteric myths and ancient religion elements in Pelevin's novels, exemplify the construction of a new reality. This reality is assembled from all pre-existing realities and a burgeoning hyperreality in the fast-paced internet era.

> "Somewhere en route to Port Vila in the New Hebrides, for my last meal I serve dinner the way I've always dreamed.
>
> Anybody caught buttering their bread before breaking it, I promise to shoot them.
>
> Anybody who drinks their beverage with food still in their mouth will also be shot.
>
> Anybody caught spooning toward themselves will be shot.
>
> Anybody caught without a napkin in their lap–
>
> Anybody caught using their fingers to move their food–
>
> Anybody who begins eating before everybody is served–
>
> Anybody who blows on food to cool it–

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[604] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 48.
[605] Chuck Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters,* London: Vintage, 2003, pp. 32, 56, 288 (and many other pages as well).

Anybody who talks with food in their mouth–

Anybody who drinks white wine holding their glass by the bowl or drinks red wine holding their glass by the stem–

You will each of you get a bullet in the head.

We are 30,000 feet above the earth, going 455 miles per hour. We're at a pinnacle of human achievement, and we are going to eat this meal as civilized human beings."[606]

Simulacrum

In juxtaposition of the Art Object/Finished Work of modernism against Process/Performance/Happening in postmodernism, Hassan reflects modernism's emphasis on the art object as a finished, self-contained work with intrinsic value and contrasts it with postmodernism's emphasis on the process rather than the finished product.

Simulacrum, as understood by Jean Baudrillard, has practically overcome its existence as the faithful copy representative of the real, thus offering a new form of hyperreality. In a hypertrashrealism context, Simulacrum is an element inherited from postmodernism, where the act of creation exposes and builds upon the postulates of a hyperreal environment.

Pelevin is one of the most obvious literary admirers of Baudrillard's cultural theory, and he very literally applied the idea behind the work *Simulation and Simulacra* to the novel examined in Part IV of the thesis, *Generation P* in which whole governments are computer-generated media shows, and a human being is presented as Homo Zapiens *(see Part IV: Homo Zapiens on the Way to the Safe Haven).*

"...what are they but the voice of history speaking through millions of television screens?"[607]

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[606] Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor,* London: Vintage, 2000 (first published in 1999), pp. 3, 2 (please note that the pagination of this novel is numbered backwards, starting from the page 289).
[607] Victor Pelevin, *Omon Ra,* London: Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 104.

In general, both Pelevin and Palahniuk mirror the shift towards hypertrashrealism precisely as the response to the post-Soviet and post-Cold-War existence, in which the death of narratives on a greater geopolitical scale was met with the hyperreal existence powered by technology, enabling any given individual to create their own hyperreality as their own personal reality. Their narratives mirror the overall tendency for hyperbolized versions of irony, sexuality, transgression, and the overall existence. With social media feeds created in the synergy of personal interests, social media circles, online habits, and governing network algorithms; with smart devices whose screens have become our main tools to process reality in real-time; with pop culture that has slowly and uncontrollably degraded into oversaturated trash culture; with gang mentality, conspiracy theories, and alternative facts challenging the postulates of scientific understanding of our existence, the simulacrum has equally taken over both the avant-garde and the mainstream, both the philosophical and the mundane. By acknowledging it fully as the governing modus operandi of contemporary reality, the artist seeks subversion in embracing the simulacrum, in order to discover new means of a more meaningful disruption.

"Brandy changes channels.

Brandy changes channels.

Brandy changes channels.

Evie is everywhere after midnight, offering what she's got on a silver tray. The studio audience ignores her, watching themselves on the monitor, trapped in a reality loop of watching themselves watch themselves, trying the way we do every time we look in a mirror to figure out exactly who that person is.

That loop that never ends."[608]

Disruption

Hassan's concepts of Distance in modernism and Participation in postmodernism illustrate how modernists and postmodernists engage with their

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[608] Chuck Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters,* London: Vintage, 2003, pp. 265, 266.

surrounding reality and realism as artistic tendency. Immersed in psychoanalysis, the inner monologue, and the stream of consciousness, modernists created distance from realism, using symbolic expressions and interpretations. Postmodernists, on the other hand, employed active participation in deconstructing old myths and grand narratives, to form playful and open-ended alternatives. In hypertrashrealism, we have returned to a new form of realism, as a response to the state of permanent simulacrum. Although built on deeply ingrained postmodern practices, it serves as a disruption to the exhaustion of postmodernity and the persistent rejection of historical context.

Similarly, the characters in Palahniuk's and Pelevin's works, confronting total loss of control over accelerating changes, depict desperate attempts to regain control through violent acts of disruption.

> "Imagine, when we call a strike and everyone refuses to work until we redistribute the wealth of the world."[609]

However, a more meaningful disruption is more delicate, as it lurks in the background, concerned with the redefinition of various social constructs. Beneath the layers of garbage, nihilism, and despair, amidst the prevailing violence, transgression and chaos, emerges a new reality born from the ultimate exhaustion of all things postmodern. The disruption it offers lies in the return to emotions, even in the most unfavorable circumstances.

> "The inviolable link between the tail and the mind – that is the foundation on which the world as we know it stands. There is nothing that can intervene in this circle of cause and effect and disrupt it. Except for one thing. Love. […]
>
> I shall ride out into the very centre of the empty field, gather all my love into my heart, pick up speed and go flying up the slope. And as soon as the wheels of my bicycle leave the ground, I shall call out my own name in a loud voice and cease to create this world. There will be an astonishing second, unlike any other. Then this world will disappear. And then, at last, I shall discover who I really am."[610]

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[609] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 149.
[610] Victor Pelevin, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2008, pp. 330 and 333.

Recreation/Reconstruction

Hassan's Creation of modernity responds to the narratives in the century of rapid industrialization and the redefinition of the very idea of human existence. The Totalization of human experience was turned inwards, towards inner processes, from which emerged a new sense of individuality. In the period of disillusionment following two world wars and two nuclear bombings, postmodernists instead gravitated toward the Destruction and Deconstruction of myths, utopias, and grand narratives in general. The debris of such deconstruction left hypertrashrealism with the task of picking up the pieces for the Recreation/Reconstruction of ideas, myths, and identity, both in its physical and virtual manifestations.

> "We can spend our lives letting the world tell us who we are. Sane or insane. Saints or sex addicts. Heroes or victims. Letting history tell us how good or bad we are.
>
> Letting our past decide our future.
>
> Or we can decide for ourselves.
>
> And maybe it's our job to invent something better."[611]

This Recreation/Reconstruction is an ongoing and modular process, respecting the unpredictable algorithms of human existence in the post-ideological, late capitalist era. Finally, this approach is necessary for the sustainable processing of the accumulated trash. Both Palahniuk's and Pelevin's characters represent a search for a reconstructed identity, moving away from the notions of identity created by past coordinates, in an age where the idea of a solid identity hardly even exists.

> "Gazing at the faces of the horses and the people, at this boundless stream of life raised up by the power of my will and now hurtling into nowhere across the sunset-crimson steppe, I often think: where am I in this flux? GHENGIS KHAN"[612]

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[611] Chuck Palahniuk, *Choke*, London: Vintage, 2003, p. 292.
[612] Victor Pelevin, *The Clay Machine Gun*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 1999, p. vii.

Metathesis

Synthesis, as associated by Hassan with modernism, suggests a tendency towards integrating diverse elements into a cohesive whole, reflecting the modernist search for unity. Antithesis, in relation to postmodernism, indicates a move away from such unification, emphasizing contrast, opposition, and the deconstruction of comprehensive narratives, which aligns with postmodernism's inclination towards diversity, relativism, and skepticism.

With hypertrashrealism, Metathesis suggests that the entire system faces a potential glitch, an error in the system of reasoning, and an inevitable mistake as a narrative device. In Pelevin's work *S.N.U.F.F.* we encounter a deliberate example of linguistic metathesis, notably the word "Urkaina." In this post-apocalyptic sci-fi novel, "Urkaina" is portrayed as a supposedly technologically backward land with predominantly Russian-speaking inhabitants, in contrast to "Big Byz" or Byzantium, where English is spoken as a Church language, while Russian is used for common communication. The entire narrative serves as a paradigm of metathesis, illustrating that the imperial, aggressive, and supposedly technologically superior society is, in fact, corrupt, while the enslaved one lives in its own version of an imprisoning simulacrum.

Similarly, Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Pygmy*, starring the eponymous character Pygmy (aka Agent Number 67), is written in a form of *Engrish*, a version of English spoken by an Asian speaker. Pygmy writes an epistolary novel in a language filled with mistakes, offering a new perspective on the United States of America in comparison to his fictional totalitarian home country.

In hypertrashrealism, metathesis is deliberate, appropriated, and controlled, deeply embedded in the narrative as an echo of the contemporary evolution of language in the era of the internet. It also serves as a paradigm for the misunderstanding of the world and reality around us due to the false interpretation of facts, information, and superficially acquired knowledge.

"Next now plastic pineapple of cat sister commence vibrate. Sister burrow fingers between bananas, retrieve small black apparatus. Personal telephone. Eyes rested on buttons, say, "It's Sri Latke."

Say Magda, "Sri Lanka."

"Whatever," say host sister, thumbing button keyboard,"[613]

Oversaturation

[614]

Hassan's Presence in modernism refers to the importance of a central meaning or truth that is directly represented in a work, implying a certain immediacy or clarity. In contrast, Absence in postmodernism suggests the elusiveness of meaning, and the idea that meaning is not fixed but rather fragmented or absent altogether.

In hypertrashrealism, there is an overwhelming excess of meaning within a hyperconsuming culture, akin to a relentless flood of stimuli that engulfs individuals in

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[613] Chuck Palahniuk, *Pygmy*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2009, p. 42.
[614] Пелевин, В. О., *Числа*, Москва: Эксмо, 2006., the cover page design.

a torrent of information and imagery (well captured in the above presented cover page of one of Pelevin's novels). This Oversaturation doesn't discriminate; it arises from the unfiltered accumulation and rapid acceleration of information flow, modes of communication, historical references, and a sea of disposable content that blankets our daily lives. It signifies the profound erosion of clear boundaries and distinctions, blurring the once-defined lines between culture and pop culture, high culture and trash culture, genuine knowledge and the inundation of misinformation.

> "Such will be the fate, I thought with bitterness, of all the arts in this dead-end tunnel into which we are being dragged by the locomotive of history. If even a fairground ventriloquist has to resort to such cheap tricks to maintain his audience's interest, then what can possibly lie ahead for the art of poetry? There will be no place at all left for it in the new world – or rather, there will, but poems will only be considered interesting if it is known on the basis of sound documentary evidence that their author has two pricks, or at the very least, that he is capable of reciting them through his arse."[615]

In this chaotic landscape, traditional markers of value and meaning become elusive, buried under layers of noise and triviality. The constant bombardment of advertisements, viral trends, and sensational news stories competes for our attention, leaving us perpetually distracted and fragmented.

In the works of both Palahniuk and Pelevin, this sense of oversaturation finds expression through their narrative techniques, densely layered plots, and multifaceted characters. Their novels serve as mirrors to this frenetic cultural landscape, reflecting back to us the disorienting experience of navigating a world where meaning is elusive, and the pursuit of clarity becomes an arduous task amidst the ever-shifting tides of contemporary existence.

The narrative is thus appropriately overflowing with referentiality in a way that is extremely self-aware, innately satirical, and deeply dismissive of any notion of

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[615] Victor Pelevin, *The Clay Machine Gun*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 1999, pp. 277-278.

higher ground or any sense of confidence about possessing even the basic level of control.

> "I wanted to give up the idea I had any control. Shake things up. To be saved by chaos. To see if I could cope, I wanted to force myself to grow again. To explode my comfort zone."[616]

Patchwork

In Hassan's comparison, Centering implies a focus on centralized themes, unified structures, and coherent meanings within modernist works. On the other hand, Dispersal in postmodernism refers to the breakdown of centralized structures, and the resistance to unified interpretations.

In line with the increasing absence of control mentioned in the Oversaturation segment, postmodernist Dispersal is no longer applicable. To create something new in the landscape of hypertrashreality, the author patches together all the available pieces of reality, virtual reality, language, and culture. This does not imply a lack of structure; on the contrary, the pieces are meticulously sewn together in a carefully planned structure, allowing extreme freedom in combining them. The almost mathematically precise structure of the narratives enables the chaotic pieces of *chaosmos*[617] to fit seamlessly together and present something entirely new and upcycled for a fresh reading, providing an opportunity to grasp what seems beyond reach. Returning to a closed structure, the author introduces a new opportunity to subvert the absence of control resulting from oversaturation.

In Palahniuk's *Rant,*[618] the entire narrative is constructed through a series of interviews and testimonials from various characters who knew the enigmatic protagonist, Rant Casey. These fragmented accounts come together like puzzle pieces,

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[616] Chuck Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters,* London: Vintage, 2003, p. 286.
[617] Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos,* Edited by Eliot Borenstein, New York: Routledge, 2015 (first published in 1999 by M. E. Sharp).
[618] Chuck Palahniuk, *Rant: an Oral Biography of Buster Casey*, New York: Doubleday, 2007.

forming a patchwork portrait of Rant's life and the unusual events surrounding it. The following excerpt represents one that is almost a literal metaphor of it.

> "The trouble was, Irene Casey couldn't not be creative. She wouldn't not express herself. She was always trying some new skill, embroidering sunflowers and ivy leaves. Smiling half-moons and stars. Trying iron-on patches or colors of glitter paint. Chrome rivets. Batik and tie-dye. Mrs. Casey would sit up half a night, hunched over and stitching herself blind in bad light, trying to make regular clothes into something special."[619]

Parody/Wordplay

Modernist Boundaries, within the confines of the set Genre, framed the overarching sentiment of having control to grasp objective truth. Postmodernists, on the other hand, distanced themselves from such a stance and began to focus on the Text itself and the Intertext it could imply. This shift was a response to the lack of belief in objective truth and an acceptance of the limitations imposed by constructs created by society. Wordplay and flirtation with low culture released the tension brought about by the overreaching ambitions of modernists in terms of style and form.

Postmodernists experimented with a mixture of absurdity and triviality, switching from one genre to another within the course of a single work and employing wordplay that resonated with the age of pop culture and the language of advertising – the language of the market. However, even in the works of Thomas Pynchon, considered an extraordinary example of postmodernism, we witness a play with language that leans towards complete narrative deconstruction. The intensity of wordplay may appear banal on the surface, but it echoes the loop of internet-saturated realities, ushering in another level of belief – that not only is there no objective truth to grasp, but also the unsettling feeling of disbelief in the idea that the word "truth" means what we initially thought it did. These disorienting narratives, oversaturated with

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[619] ibid., p. 100.

referentiality and wordplay, serve the purpose of pushing language to its limits, toward the brink of paroxysm, in order to communicate its ontological flaws.

In the works of both authors, Palahniuk and Pelevin, the populist shock and constant hypertrophied wordplay go hand in hand, conveying the feeling of numbness experienced by individuals constantly bombarded with an accelerating amount of text in real life, often devoid of any meaning.

"The Prayer for a Parking Space

Oh, divine and merciful God,

History is without equal for how much I will adore

You, when You give me today, a place to park.

For You are the provider.

And You are the source.

From You all good is delivered.

Within You all is found."[620]

In hypertrashrealism, Parody and Wordplay can be seen as methods of pushing postmodernism's intertextual play to its extremes. Parody in this context doesn't just mimic for humor but also serves as a form of distraction. Wordplay complements this by further bending language and meaning, engaging in puns, double entendres, and other linguistic tricks to subvert expectations and traditional interpretations. However, the parody is directed toward unveiling the excessive hypertrash as the truth veiled by the parody.

"The elite here is divided into two branches, which are called 'the oligarchy' (derived from the words 'oil' and 'gargle') and 'the apparat' (from the phrase 'upper rat')."[621]

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[620] Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor,* London: Vintage, 2000 (first published in 1999), p. 124 (please note that the pagination of this novel is numbered backwards, starting from the page 289).
[621] Victor Pelevin, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf,* translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2008, p. 85.

Computational Linguistics/NLP (Natural language processing)

"His computer password is 'password.'"[622]

Hassan's distinction between modernists and postmodernists reveals that modernists, motivated by their pursuit of truth and meaning, approached language with a focus on Semantics, while postmodernists viewed language as a utilitarian device to be playfully manipulated, thus focusing on Rhetoric. However, in the era of hypertrashrealism, language has evolved beyond its conventional role as a mere functional tool; it has become a central character in its own right. Today, the pervasive influence of technology, the emergence of machine learning, the development of artificial intelligence, and the ongoing evolution of language within the digital realm have given language a new dimension. This evolution is exemplified by the simultaneous efforts to teach machines human language and the endeavors of humans to grasp the language of machines, primarily computer coding.

Computational Linguistics/NLP (Natural Language Processing) represents the field dedicated to enabling computers to comprehend, interpret, and generate human language. It plays a crucial role in various applications, including natural language interfaces for software, automated translation services, text summarization, sentiment analysis in social media, and many others. It bridges the gap between human language and computers, enabling machines to interact with and understand human communication more effectively. As a result, the evolution of language in the digital age becomes an inevitable and integral theme interwoven into the development of textual narratives. This theme may manifest subtly in some instances and explicitly in others, as demonstrated in works such as Pelevin's *The Helmet of Horror*, *iPhuck 10*, and Palahniuk's *Beautiful You*).

"Monstradamus

А в чем его программа?

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[622] Chuck Palahniuk, *Lullaby*, New York: Anchor Books, 2003, pp. 18, 40, and 70.

Nutscracker

В лабиринте надо поворачивать два раза вправо и один раз влево, потом опять два раза вправо и один раз влево, и так до самого конца."[623]

Modality (Human–Computer Interaction)

In Hassan's analysis, modernism seeks meaning within a single overarching Paradigm, while postmodernism embraces the play of differences and the chain of signifiers in the Syntagm, celebrating interpretive diversity. In the context of the preceding and subsequent aspects, hypertrashrealism extends intertextual play to various Modalities of human-computer interaction.

Machines primarily employ visual, audio, and tactile stimuli to communicate with humans, while our inputs commonly involve simple modalities such as keyboard or touchscreen interactions, as well as more complex ones like speech recognition, motion sensing, and computer vision, often integrated with virtual reality (VR) technology. The widespread use of smart devices has made most of these modalities familiar to the average person, allowing for the adoption of more complex modalities following the initial mass adoption of simpler ones. A humorous illustration of this can be found in Palahniuk's *Pygmy* when the protagonist encounters sensor doors for the first time.

"Magic quiet door go sideways, disappear inside wall to open path from outside."[624]

The mass consumption of smart devices and advanced technologies has redefined what is considered science fiction in literature. These concepts are now mundane aspects of our hypertrashreality rather than exciting visionary novelties. Consequently, they have paved the way for sci-fi realism, which functions both as satire

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[623] Виктор Пелевин, *Шлем ужаса: Креатифф о Тесее и Минотавре,* Москва: Открытый Мир, 2005, стр. 165.
[624] Chuck Palahniuk, *Pygmy*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2009, p. 221.

and as a disappointing reflection of our realistic human landscape. This is exemplified in the following excerpt from Pelevin's *iPhuck.*

"Уже сама настройка опций айфильма содержит высокую игру – она отсылает к Сартру. Фильм можно смотреть в двух модусах: «Читать» и «Писать» (так на-соваются части знаменитой повести Сартра «Слова»). в режиме «Читать» вы увидите изысканную, но сухова-тую бутик-сексодраму. В режиме «Писать» (ударение на «а») вас ждет самое увлекательное и невероятное интеллектуальное приключение вашей жизни.

Да – вы, наверно, уже догадались. У вас появляется возможность увидеть перед собой компьютер Бейонда с его делящимся экраном – и закончить одну из глав «Времени и ничто» (полный электронный текст книги прилагается к айфильму).

Сделать это можно в двух режимах. Для геев (и вагинальной аудитории – такая опция тоже есть) вполне подойдет стандартное дилдо айфака-10 – его сенсоры настолько точны, что порог срабатывания при сжатии можно настроить любым удобным для вас образом. Но в этом, конечно, будет элемент читинга.

Если же зритель или зрительница хотят увидеть (и ощутить) айфильм так, как он задуман режиссером, им следует воспользоваться входящей в комплект айфака-10 синфазной анальной пробкой – и только ею.

Она значительно меньшего диаметра, но ее встроенный сенсор не так чувствителен и требует большего мышецного усилия. Именно таким был зонд самого Бейонда – и это придаст вашему интеллектуальному приключению волнующую аутентичность.

Все ценители смотрят этот айфильм только таким образом; больше того, читеров даже не допускают к участию в конкурсе «Допис. Ж.-Л.Б.» (за одним-единственным исключением)."[625]

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[625] Виктор Пелевин, *iPhuck 10*, Москва: Э, 2017, стр. 329-330.

Word Processing

> "*Are you there, Satan? It's me, Madison. Please don't take this as a criticism, but you really ought to upgrade your word-processing equipment. The readability of your dot-matrix printer especially sucks, not to mention those perforated tracks that hang off the edges of every printed page.*"[626]

In modernism, there was a tendency to use complex sentence structures and subordinate clauses (referred to as Hypotaxis) in an effort to convey deeper meaning and coherence in literary works. However, in the era of postmodernism, this approach was abandoned in favor of more fragmented and disjointed thoughts and ideas, which is characterized by the use of Parataxis, a style of writing where independent clauses or phrases are placed side by side without subordination.

Fragmentation, a typical feature of postmodernism, remains a relevant element in hypertrashrealism as well, only transformed by the effects of digital environments and word processing tools. We are now influenced not only by the fragmentation of thoughts, ideologies, and information overload but also by the logic of word processing software, which allows greater freedom in text editing and manipulation. Fragmentation thus increasingly reflects our position in the digital age and a departure from modernist philosophy. Short, fragmentary sentences are no longer solely a matter of stylistic choice but a repetition of the fragmentary approach to text processing as experienced everyday.

In the following excerpt by Victor Pelevin, the last word shouted to the cosmos initially holds no specific meaning in Russian:

> "И когда он, смеясь, упал в траву, она – то ли показывая ему крюк, то ли показывая его крюку, то ли просто зеркальным и суровым мидовским жестом – встала прямо над его обращенным к небу лицом и закричала на весь Космос:
>
> - Згыын!"[627]

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[626] Chuck Palahniuk, *Damned,* New York: Anchor Books, 2011, p. 156.
[627] Виктор Пелевин, *Тайные виды на гору Фудзи*, Москва: Эксмо, 2018, стр. 404.

Only when it is typed into a search browser or entered using an English-language keyboard does it reveal its meaning as the English slang word "pussy" (for which the Russian equivalent would be "пизда"). This playful and subversive tactic involves the writer using a Russian keyboard to type an English word, concealing its meaning and playing with the language shift that occurs when using new text creation tools.
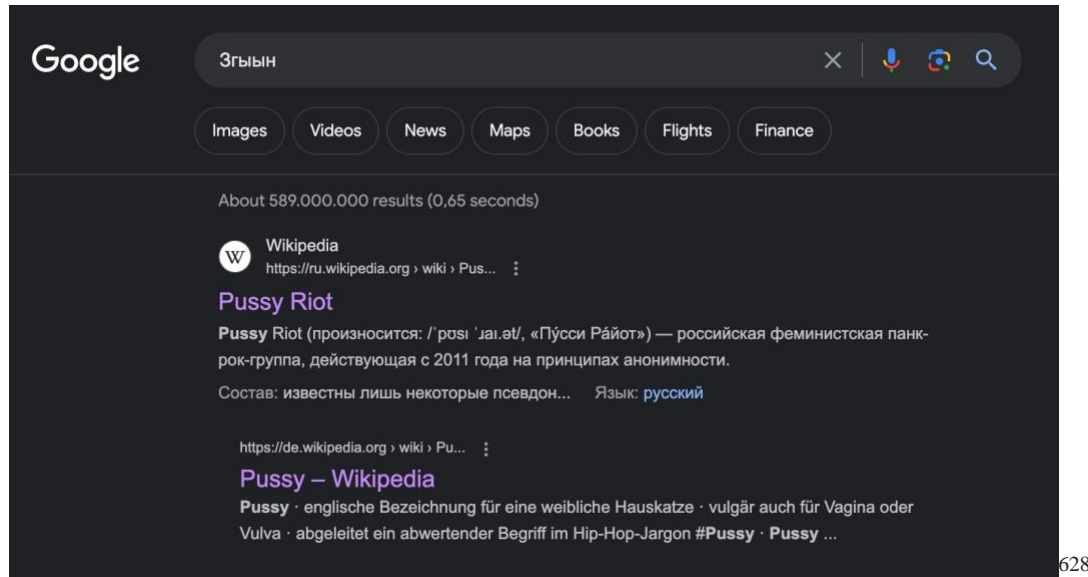
Synecdoche

Leopold Bloom is one of the most iconic fictional characters, appearing in James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*,[629] considered one of the most important modernist novels. Bloom's interest in astronomic parallax served Joyce as a carefully planted metaphor for the entire approach to the novel and stands as one of the most clearly evident examples of modernist emphasis on the Metaphor itself. As Barbara Stevens Heusel points out in "Parallax as a Metaphor for the Structure of *Ulysses*",

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[628] Screenshot of the Google search result made by the dissertation author.
[629] James Joyce, *Ulysses,* Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2010 (first published in 1922).

"Obviously Joyce uses parallax because he is interested in the perception of time, space, flux, and their signatures, words (established by his work "pollysyllabax"). His strategic interweaving of parallax imagery makes clear that he thought of Ulysses' structure in terms of shifting points of view: the parallactic phenomenon. Repeatedly Bloom's focus on parallax reminds us of a similar preoccupation in Stephen. The significance of the parallactic structure is that it allows the reader a double perception. We see an idea and then its reflection as if in a mirror. Kain's categories of interpretations demonstrate that critics have been tricked by Joyce's shifting perspectives and have missed the obvious: Joyce, being the consummate manipulator, is most concerned with the reader; Joyce creates Bloom as the contrary to Stephen to give the reader an experience in parallactic vision."[630]

On the other hand, postmodernists naturally leaned toward Metonymy as a tool for encoding the text. One example of metonymy in postmodern literature can be found in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*.[631] The phrase "airborne toxic event" is used to describe a disastrous chemical spill from a rail car that forms a toxic cloud, potentially threatening the lives of the characters in the novel. The term does not describe the specific chemicals, the cause of the spill, or the specific actions that led to the disaster, but instead, it encapsulates the entire situation through its most dramatic and significant aspect, the airborne toxic cloud. It is not just a literal cloud but a metonym for the complex, diffuse dangers of contemporary life and the characters' anxieties about death, technology, and the information overload of modern society.

In hypertrashrealism, Synecdoche, which can be seen as a more specific form of metonymy, focuses on the *pars pro toto* approach. This shift occurs due to the heightened fragmentation and isolation of an individual within their microcosm amid an overwhelmingly complex macrocosm. For instance:

"I am Jane's Uterus. I am Joe's Prostate."[632]

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[630] Barbara Stevens Heusel, "Parallax As a Metaphor for the Structure of *Ulysses*", in: *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983, p. 143.
[631] Don DeLillo, *White Noise,* New York: Viking, 1985.
[632] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 58.

In the same manner in which the protagonists represent the *pars pro toto* for the generational and historical whole, we have the 'Soviet old shoe' in Pelevin's *Generation P* symbolizing the obsolete and worn Soviet Union, and 'Pepsi' as the symbol of an entire post-Soviet generation. In Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, the destroyed IKEA furniture represents the broader attack on consumerism and capitalism, and the quoted body parts used in the same novel serve as a literal and visceral synecdoche of corporeality. *Fight Club*'s fictional character Tyler Durden, as a product of dissociative personality disorder, embodies the 'pars pro toto' of the generational malaise, while *Generation P*'s' CGI-generated Yeltsin symbolizes the 'pars pro toto' of the post-Soviet simulacrum experience.

> "'Well,' said Tatarsky,'I just thought, maybe the entire Generation 'P', that is the one that chose Pepsi – you chose Pepsi when you were young as well, didn't you?'
>
> 'What other choice was there?'"[633]

Repetition and Recombination

> "I look like shit, dead.
> I look like dead shit."[634]

As seen through Roman Jakobson's theory of structural linguistics,[635] meaning is examined along two axes: the axis of selection (the paradigmatic relation) and the axis of combination (the syntagmatic relation). Hassan's theory attributes Selection to modernism and Combination to postmodernism, in accord with one of the previous comparisons (see the quoted table and/or the section on Modality).

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[633] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, pp. 246-247.

[634] Chuck Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters,* London: Vintage, 2003, p. 156.

[635] Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances", in: *Roman Jakobson, Selected Writing, Volume II Word and Language,* The Hague: De Gruyter Mouton, 1971, pp. 239-259.

In Dave Ciccoricco's 2005 thesis, *Repetition and Recombination: Reading Network Fiction,* Repetition and Recombination refer to the dynamic processes within network texts, which give rise to 'material repetitions' that facilitate creative acts of interpretation through recombination. Recombination is seen as an interpretive act, suggesting that revisiting a text can lead to a reinterpretation that builds upon previous understandings. This is not limited to literature but can also occur in various contexts, such as logic, mathematics, music, and visual art.[636] Building on the ideas explored by John Barth in *The Literature of Exhaustion*,[637] *The Literature of Replenishment*,[638] followed by *The State of the Art*,[639] he also notes that these processes were apparent even in narratives predating the World Wide Web.[640]

I would argue that within hypertrashrealism, Repetition and Recombination extend beyond merely applying to language and meaning. They are also instrumental in forging new ideas and experiences from age-old facts, ideas, and concepts that overwhelm us and demand new interpretations. Narratives of Palahniuk and Pelevin, resembling hypertext, are often repetitive and recombine the overall human history and condition with the aim to annihilate old meanings and to usher in new ones. Similarly, hypertext allows repetition and recombination to create reinterpretation.

> "'Great Nostradamus,' he said, 'tell me, do, how long will the bloody hydra of the foe continue to resist the Red Army?'
>
> I wondered what the name Nostradamus could mean to them – perhaps some mighty hero bestriding the dark annals of proletarian mythology? The invisible Nostradamus replied:
>
> 'Not long.'"[641]

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[636] Dave Ciccoricco, *Repetition and Recombination: Reading Network Fiction*, Christchurch, New Zealand: University of Canterbury, 2005, p. 81.
[637] John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion", in: *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*, London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984, originally published in 1967, pp. 62-76.
[638] John Bart, "The Literature of Replenishment", in: *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*, London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984, pp. 193-206.
[639] John Barth, "The State of the Art", in: *The Wilson Quarterly*: *Spring 1996*, Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1996, pp. 36-45.
[640] Dave Ciccoricco, *Repetition and Recombination: Reading Network Fiction*, Christchurch, New Zealand: University of Canterbury, 2005, p. 29.
[641] Victor Pelevin, *The Clay Machine Gun*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 1999, p. 276.

Mutation/Cyberspace

"'The world had become chaos, but the book remains the image of the world: radicle-chaosmos rather than root-chaos' (Deleuze 1992: 29). This system, in turn, leads to a modern world model – a rhizomatic one.

[…]

At the same time, we cannot help but recognize that the rhizomatic model of artistic unity cannot possibly be stable; by its very nature, it verges on entropy and is drawn to self-destruction. It is a clear example of *paralogic compromise* – here, between unity and fragmentation, between authorial control and spontaneity. As we have seen, such a compromise cannot help but be explosive and unstable."[642]

The referenced Deleuze's chaosmic theory and Lipovetsky's interpretation of it are mentioned here due to Hassan's binary take on modernism and postmodernism, as the intertwined relationship of Root/Depth and Rhizome/Surface. Hypertrashrealism, while remaining faithful to some elements of Deleuze's model, such as fragmentation and an inclination towards total entropy, draws a further distinction from the postmodernist tendency to be an unstable derivative of modernism. It goes further, anticipating the new space created through the acceleration of the rhizomatic model, and its mutation due to system errors (glitches). The sustainability of the rhizomatic model stems from the added opportunities of cyberspace that alleviate the potential explosive instability of the system. The hypertrashrealists have embraced the rhizomatic model of *chaosmos* and allow themselves not just to avoid its pitfalls, but to use the new space created for planting the seeds of a chaotic yet sustainable multitude of realities, which will inevitably survive, thanks to the humorously unpredictable glitch. In Pelevin's *Omon Ra,* the accidentally misfired gun leads Omon out of the simulacrum he was living in towards a new and unpredictable life.

"I had to decide where to go."[643]

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[642] Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos,* Edited by Eliot Borenstein, New York: Routledge, 2015 (first published in 1999 by M. E. Sharp), pp. 34 and 103.

[643] Victor Pelevin, *Omon Ra,* London: Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 5.

In Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters,* the main character's new reality, shaped by her self-inflicted disfigurements, force her to navigate the world in a new way, much like users in cyberspace adopting different personas or dealing with altered realities. These examples highlight the instability and transformation of the self, akin to the mutation in the cyberspace.

> "What I thought last was, at last I'll be growing again, mutating, adapting, evolving. I'll be physically challenged.
>
> I couldn't wait."[644]

Open-Ended Apperception / Rereading

In the dynamic of modernist Interpretation/Reading and postmodernist Against Interpretation/Misreading, postmodernism is seen through the lens of Susan Sontag in her essay *Against Interpretation*, where she advocates for abolishing interpretation. She argues that interpretation a priori prevents the recognition of the sensory quality in art due to the predetermined intellectual, scientific, or aesthetic criteria formed in the past. This paradox easily leads to unnecessary over-intellectualizing and misreading, as the interpretation is not applicable to future works of art, due to its inability to leave room for new scientific or aesthetic insights.

> "Interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there. This cannot be taken for granted, now. Think of the sheer multiplication of works of art available to every one of us, superadded to the conflicting tastes and odors and sights of the urban environment that bombard our senses. […] In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."[645]

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[644] Chuck Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters,* London: Vintage, 2003, p. 287.
[645] Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation"*,* in: *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966, pp. 1-10.

Chuck Palahniuk addresses the phenomenon of the misreading and appropriation of his book *Fight Club* in his later novel *Adjustment Day*, but finds it not only a problem of hermeneutics but also a problem of the *erotics of art*.

> "This book combined with the Internet gimmick of The List – it was a drug. As the author himself had put it:
>
> A Good Book Should Get You High."[646]

By the very act of addressing it, he points to the inevitability of Open-Ended Apperception, but also invites Rereading. Hypertrashrealism does not and cannot block interpretation or misinterpretation but questions both hermeneutics and sensory oversaturation. It rather suggests that in the new world of open-ended and multiplying realities and experiences, accelerated by virtual reality and the overflow of codes and information, there is an open-ended number of approaches to perceiving, analyzing, and feeling a work of art, inviting Rereading of a text with every new reader and his or her corresponding experience with it, dependent on a great number of cultural, empirical, and sensory variables, or political intentions. We witness similar ideas in Pelevin's often philosophical vignettes as well.

> "I had understood this in the sense that the light itself had been transformed, but Chapaev said that the nature of light does not change, and everything depends on the subject of perception."[647]

Floating Signifier

In the dichotomy of sign, Hassan ascribed Signifier to modernism and Signified to postmodernism. Hypertrashrealism, based on the foundations of postmodernism, remains in the field of Signifier but notes that the multiplication of meanings expands with each receiver, remaining forever open for further interpretation. The hyper-nature of the context in which the narrative is created, the hyperreality of the simulacrum context, is reflected in the meaning as well, maximizing the number of Floating

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[646] Chuck Palahniuk, *Adjustment Day*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2018, p. 269.
[647] Victor Pelevin, *The Clay Machine Gun*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 1999, p. 314.

Signifiers. In this context, in an environment of rapid information flow, it is easy to manipulate and relativize any sign. Often in the work of Pelevin and Palahniuk, it is hard for the characters to grasp any meaningful notion of reality, amidst the multitude of its interpretations. Even the characters who reach a very high level of power do not achieve a very high level of control over understanding the meaning.

> "'But surely someone has to control the economy, not just wind people up and come on heavy?' […] 'For the time being let me just say the world isn't run by a 'who', it's run by a 'what'. By certain factors and impulses it's too soon for you to be learning about. Although in fact, Babe, there's no way you could not know about them. That's the paradox of it all…'"[648]

Palahniuk's characters, accordingly, due to their nihilist nature, tend to develop very particular obsessions with pessimistic interpretations, as in the case of Victor, a former medical student, in the novel *Choke*.

> "Ignorance was bliss. […]
> Everybody you see naked, you see as a patient. A dancer could have clear lovely eyes and hard brown nipples, but if her breath is bad she has leukemia. A dancer might have thick, long, clean-looking hair, but if she scratches her scalp, she has Hodgkin's lymphoma."[649]

The same applies to their readers, who often misinterpret and appropriate their work, so you can easily have a prototypical right-wing macho man using the mantras of *Fight Club*, or capitalist corporations appropriating the anti-capitalist *Generation P* or *Empire V*. There is a bank in Belgrade that has *Empire V* in the waiting room "library" to be read by their clients. More than in any other book, *Empire V*, through its central "bablos" theme, is a satirical take on the global monetary system. This sign – an anti-capitalist book in a temple of monetary order – is one of the examples of just how floating a signifier can be. The question arises if the book there represents a case

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[648] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon***,** translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, pp. 176, 177.
[649] Chuck Palahniuk, *Choke,* London: Vintage, 2003, p. 104.

of cultural appropriation by the bank, a successful subversion by the writer, or merely an aesthetic element devoid of any meaning.

Screenable (Spectatorly)

> "On the TVs, they're playing the first movie Cassie ever appeared in. Shot on video, maybe one step better than some security camera at the corner quick-stop grocery. On the TVs is her and me, young as Sheila and the kid 72. Cassie's eyes are rolled up to show only white, her arms flopping loose at her sides, her head rolling around on her neck so far the pull opens her mouth, drool sliding out the corner of her lips.
>
> Slack as a blow-up sex-doll version of herself.
>
> If you want to know, that first film I did with Cassie Wright, I slipped her a diet soda mixed with beta-ketamine and Demerol. With the camera set up on a tripod next to the mattress, I fucked her everywhere my dick would fit.
>
> Because I loved her so much.
>
> That first movie was called *Frisky Business*. After she got famous, the distributor recut it and released the movie as *Lay Misty for Me*. Recut as *World Whore One*.
>
> If you got to know, Cassie never planned to make that first movie."[650]

Roland Barthes' theory offered us the dichotomy of texts that are seen either as Lisible (Readable) – straightforward and understandable – and Scriptable (Writerly), whose meaning hides under the surface.[651] Hassan uses this dichotomy to mark modernist texts as lisible and postmodernist ones as scriptable, although I would argue with such a simplification in this segment, as modernists relied heavily on symbolism and the break with the linearity of realism. Postmodernist texts can be seen as those heavily relying on the hidden encrypted meaning, and hypertrashrealism by all means derives from such a legacy. However, it adds an important layer derived from the age

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[650] Chuck Palahniuk, *Snuff,* New York: Anchor Books, 2009, pp. 185-186.
[651] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, translated by Richard Miller, Oxford: Blackwell publishing, 1990.

of mass media and widespread accessibility of screen-based smart devices. Not only do the cinema and advertising industries exhaust literary texts as the basis, but the logic of cinematic writing also intrudes upon the written narratives. The gaze towards the screen is present not only through the logic of screenwriting being applied to literary fiction but also as a metatext that hides under the spectacle. Pelevin's *Homo Zapiens* is the dystopian everyman locked in the loop of switching between TV channels, and Palahniuk's *Snuff* protagonist who wants to create ground-breaking porn as the ultimate paroxysm of the spectator's gaze, embody exactly such a nature. The screen is seen as the main conveyor of the dystopian simulacrum, where everything is turned into a spectacle and measured by its potential to become one, but also the mode of communication that is our most widespread direct link with both humans and machines. In hypertrashrealism, meaning is not simply hidden in or behind the screen, but it is also in the gaze of the reader, whose interpretation of the text is influenced by the dominant mass and social media culture.

> "And although the person looking at the screen does not notice this customary transformation, it is truly immense. For the viewer the television disappears as a material object that possesses weight, size and other physical properties. Instead of this the viewer has the sensation of being present in a different space, a sensation familiar to all who are assembled there."[652]

This spectacle-driven culture has further blurred the lines between reality and representation, turning every event and individual into a potential performance to be consumed. The potential of a narrative or an image to become a spectacle often dictates its value and its power to engage, overshadowing its inherent qualities and the authenticity of its creation.

Hyper-narrative/Pseudo-Histoire

The Narrative, or Grande Histoire, of modernism, once revered as a seminal tool for constructing comprehensive literary works, is contested by Hassan's

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[652] Victor Pelevin, *Babylon*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2000, p. 78.

characterization of postmodernism. This latter movement redirects our focus toward Petite Histoire, championing Anti-narrative, that is, the fragmentation of discourse. This shift is not merely for deconstruction's sake, but to foreground the individual amidst the whirlpool of disorienting societal shifts. In the realm of hypertrashrealism, narratives become 'hypertextualized,' a term that transcends the literal digital fabric of interconnected texts to signify a broader response to the text's pervasive utilization. This phenomenon of Hyper-narrative reflects within literature, too, where the virtual text accelerates and amplifies the proliferation of narratives. Once the domain of authoritative voices and prominent figures, the narrative stream is now democratized, accessible to anyone with internet connectivity, and propelled by the mechanisms of social media, reviews, and commentary.

This age of hypertext is marked by a pervasive skepticism toward any definitive narrative claiming absolute veracity. In such a landscape, all is relativized and equated, paving myriad pathways for interpretation, and rendering the fabric of fact and fiction susceptible to manipulation. The literature of hypertrashrealism shoulders this burden, offering narratives that echo the hypertextualization and perpetual reevaluation of history. Narrators within this framework are often portrayed as unreliable, adrift in the overwhelming expanse and relentless recontextualization of reality that defines their world.

In most of Pelevin's and Palahniuk's books, we are witnessing some form of Pseudo-Histoire, whether broadly on the level of society, or personally in the realm of falsely constructed identities. In Palahniuk's *Survivor,* the protagonist's life story is shaped and twisted by external forces, such as his agent and the media, transforming it into a commodity for market consumption. These forces create a narrative that becomes widely accepted as the truth about Tender Branson's life, despite being a manufactured and curated collection of events designed to entertain and captivate the public. Palahniuk uses this concept to critique society's obsession with celebrity and spectacle, as well as the media's role in creating narratives that become accepted as historical fact, despite their inauthenticity.

"Before the flight recorder tape runs out, people need to know who to blame. It's the agent. The Book of Very Common Prayer. The Peace of Mind television

show. The American PornFill Corporation. The Genesis Campaign. The Tender Branson Dashboard Statuette. Even my botched Super Bowl halftime special, the agent brainstormed them all. And they all made tons of money. But what's important is none of them was my idea."[653]

In *Omon Ra*, on the other hand, Pelevin delivers a satirical take on the Soviet space program, where the narrative subverts the grand historical narrative of space exploration. Pelevin plays with the reader's understanding of what is real and what is part of the characters' indoctrinated beliefs, crafting a pseudo-historical narrative. Upon realizing his space mission was nothing but a media-constructed project, Omon's entire universe turns upside down.

"I crept behind the wardrobe. I felt apathetic, indifferent to everything. […] Following my moonside habit, I rested my head on my folded arms and dozed off. Through my sleep I heard a voice:

'This television broadcast of men at work in open space came from a camera installed by the flight engineer on one of the main unit's solar batteries.'"[654]

Code-switching

Building on the previous dichotomy, Hassan further juxtaposes the Master Code for language usage and interpretation in modernism with the Idiolect – the individual's unique and playful manipulation of language. In the era of virtual language, hypertext, advertising, and globalization, where the English language serves as the *lingua franca* and pop culture commands as a dominant force in the soft power struggle, text usage in hypertrashrealism is characterized by constant Code-switching.

"'Welcome to Wal-Mart.' Say, 'Comrade.'"[655]

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[653] Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor,* London: Vintage, 2000 (first published in 1999), p. 99 (please note that the pagination of this novel is numbered backwards, starting from the page 289).
[654] Victor Pelevin, *Omon Ra,* London: Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 148.
[655] Chuck Palahniuk, *Pygmy*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2009, p. 221.

This linguistic phenomenon normally involves the interpenetration of one language into another, but here it also extends beyond language itself. It encompasses shifts from personal to historical references, from highbrow/intellectual to lowbrow/popular culture, and from the sacred to the profane. While this approach was prevalent in postmodernism, the advent of virtual space has injected a new dimension and accelerated the narratives of hypertrashrealism. Code-switching occurs not only in the realm of linguistic expression but also across the offline and online paradigms.

> "Полотно повесили взамен вольного «OBEY», и кукуратор лично прочел художественно-политическое обоснование: заявка на общемировую культурную преемственность, бесстрашное «нет» атеизму и клерикализму, демонстрация либерального широкомыслия, консервативно-го традиционализма и так далее.
>
> Картина изображала двух седых негров в кожаной гей-упряжи, насилующих перепуганного змея под сенью цветущей яблони. Шедевр среднего гипса, работа американского мастера времен «cancel culture»"[656]

Truth/Cure

> "This, of course, is nonsense – the truth is like love, there is nothing to understand. And what is usually taken for the truth is some kind of intellectual dross."[657]

In Hassan's analysis, the psychoanalytical approach to literature reveals a tension between Symptom and Desire in the context of modernism and postmodernism. This tension reflects the inner conflict of neurotic individuals – the clash between suppressed desires and the conscious suppression of these desires. Hypertrashrealism, with its rapid pace and disjointed narratives, strives to navigate through this psychological landscape toward a revelation or healing, which can be seen as a search

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[656] Виктор Пелевин, *Transhumanism Inc*., Москва: Эксмо, 2021, стр. 547.
[657] Victor Pelevin, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf,* translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2008, p. 256.

for Truth or a Cure in psychoanalytic terms. The methodology of psychoanalysis itself relies on articulating buried desires, primarily through the process of talking therapy. In the narratives of both Palahniuk and Pelevin, characters experience significant transformations by confronting and accepting their repressed desires, a journey that unfolds regardless of their moral compasses. The quintessence of hypertrashrealism is the characters' quest for self-healing, a quest that is often veiled by their stories' overtly satirical, ironic, or subversive tones. These narrative styles do not merely disguise their quest but underscore the complexity of their psychological landscapes.

> "Sperm makes me think of sex makes me think of punishment makes me think of death makes me think of Fertility Hollis. We did what the caseworker called Free Association."[658]

Glitch

We can observe Hassan's dichotomy of Type and Mutant in relation to modernism and postmodernism through the very nature of mutation itself – the alteration occurring in the process of replication that facilitates the essential change for evolution. Postmodernism has indeed functioned as a pastiche replication of genres, tropes, facts, and literary devices, creating something unpredictable and new due to deliberate errors in these replications. While mutation prompts further exploration and allows for the understanding of the changed forms that can emerge as new types, hypertrashrealism introduces us to a Glitch in the system as the driving force. In the virtual environment, this mysterious, unpredictable, and brief malfunction self-corrects, leaving little room for active intervention by the user of the system. Although glitches are present in all types of human or natural organizations, they are particularly prevalent in computing and virtual experiences, and widely recognized in video game culture. Hypertrashrealists not only embrace the glitch but build upon it, often mockingly, rather than analyzing it, incorporating this unpredictability as part of the overall chaotic algorithm.

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[658] Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor,* London: Vintage, 2000 (first published in 1999), p. 208 (please note that the pagination of this novel is numbered backwards, starting from the page 289).

"- Я твои озера лайкал,

Фолловил поля.

Ты и фича, ты и бага,

Родина моя!"[659]

If mutation suggests an attempt to gain control, a glitch signifies the absolute inability to control the course of events or grand narratives, yet it provides an opportunity to disrupt the entire paradigm. In Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, the narrator's discovery of his own split personality is indicative of such a glitch. This revelation disrupts the narrative the protagonist has constructed and profoundly alters the reader's understanding of the story thus far.

> "Oh, this is bullshit. This is a dream. Tyler is a projection. He's a disassociative personality disorder. A psychogenic fugue state. Tyler Durden is my hallucination."[660]

The protagonist's insomnia and the subsequent creation of his alter ego, Tyler Durden, represent a glitch in his perception of reality, precipitating significant plot twists and character development. This glitch is not merely a narrative twist but also serves as a critical commentary on identity, control, and self-destruction.

Technosexual/Cyborg

Freud's Genital/Phallic stage, identified as the pinnacle of adult maturity, is where an individual surpasses the initial, unconscious desires and develops a mature sexual identity oriented towards the external world beyond the nuclear family. Hassan associates this stage with modernism, whereas the Polymorphous/Androgynous stage, characterized by sexual and gender fluidity and the breaking away from heteronormative and reproductive paradigms, is aligned with postmodernism.

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[659] Виктор Пелевин, *Batman Apollo*, Москва: Эксмо, 2013, стр. 482.
[660] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2013 (first published in 1996), p. 168.

In today's era, individuals often exhibit a fetishistic relationship with technology, giving rise to the term 'technosexual'—a blend of 'metrosexual' and 'technology'. This term not only denotes an aesthetic appreciation for gadgets and urban lifestyle but also suggests a burgeoning sexual desire akin to robot fetishism. The fashion industry, recognizing this cultural shift, has commodified the term, as exemplified by Calvin Klein's branding efforts.

> "Last year, the company went so far as to trademark 'technosexual,' anticipating it could become a buzzword for marketing to millennials, the roughly 80 million Americans born from 1982 to 1995. A typical line from the press materials for CK in2u goes like this: 'She likes how he blogs, her texts turn him on. It's intense. For right now.'"[661]

Hypertrashrealism scrutinizes this reality where newfound liberties collide with commodification. Chuck Palahniuk's *Beautiful You* and *Snuff*, along with Viktor Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.*, position their female protagonists, both human and cyborg, at the forefront of a technosexually degenerate age. These narratives resonate with Donna Haraway's *The Cyborg Manifesto*, which serves as a foundational text for social and feminist posthumanist thought.

> "Feminist cyborg stories have the task of recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control."[662]

In *Beautiful You*, a disillusioned American woman's quest for identity leads her into the clutches of a messianic antagonist wielding nanotechnology. Her struggle reflects the broader dilemmas faced by women seeking autonomy and purpose beyond traditional roles:

> "She wanted a choice beyond: Housewife versus lawyer. […]
>
> Her goals had been the goals of radical women a century ago: to become a lawyer . . . to compete toe-to-toe with men. But like any second-hand goal, it felt like a burden. It had already been fulfilled ten million times over by other

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[661] Eric Wilson, *How to Bottle a Generation.* New York: The New York Times, 2017.

[662] Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century"*,* in: *Manifestly Haraway*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, p. 56.

women. Penny wanted a dream of her own, but she had no idea how that dream would look." [663]

The technosexual age, despite its risks of fixation, humiliation, abuse, and degradation, also harbors the seeds of a new revolution. In Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.*, an android's revolutionary act of developing the capacity to love transcends her pornographic utility, echoing Haraway's aspiration for humanity in an era where our interactions with technology hold the potential to liberate us from the confines of sex- and gender-based identities:

> "Впрочем, Кая говорила, что ответ – это мы сами.
>
> Мы сами - и то, что мы делаем с жизнью, своей и чужой." [664]

Dissociative Identity Disorder

Hassan correlates modernism with Paranoia and postmodernism with Schizophrenia, interpreting the narratives of the 20th century as converging with the broader spectrum of psychosis. Hypertrashrealists grapple with a world scarred by the profound traumas of a tumultuous century and the growing dread of an apocalyptic future, exacerbated by climate change forecasts. In this era, marked by the aftermaths of the atomic bomb, the Cold War, and the digital revolution, the concept of identity is notably precarious, frequently manifesting as a defense mechanism against the barrage of new, unfathomable realities and lingering historical traumas. The character Tyler Durden from *Fight Club* exemplifies such fragmentation, representing a clear case of Dissociative Identity Disorder. However, the works of Pelevin and Palahniuk broadly address the reconfiguration of identity in the wake of personal, national, or significant narrative upheavals.

> "Trauma writers often depict traumatized characters creating a provisional identity as a way of adapting to adversity (Lifton 30; Vickroy, Trauma and Survival 125; Langer 121–61). For instance, Palahniuk's protagonists embrace

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[663] Chuck Palahniuk, *Beautiful* You, New York: Doubleday, 2014, p. 5.
[664] Виктор Пелевин, *S.N.U.F.F.,* Москва: Эскмо, 2012, стр. 479.

narcissism to avoid painful emotions, and to fill in the gaps characteristic of an ungrounded, underrecognized identity that s driven by a seemingly unfillable emptiness that they fear and avoid."[665]

In *The Clay Machine Gun,* Pelevin weaves a philosophical satire that leaves readers questioning whether the protagonist, Pustota (literally "the void"), is actually institutionalized or merely plagued by nightmares of such a fate. Whether the disorder is literal or metaphorical, the narrative engages deeply with themes of dissociative identity crisis. Similarly, in *Omon Ra*, the protagonist's delusion of being on a covert KGB mission to the moon – a mission that in reality unfolds in the Moscow Metro – serves as an allegory for the disconnection from the trauma of post-Soviet reality, challenging the glorified myths of heroism and the grand narratives of cosmonauts as mere instruments of state propaganda.

> "Whatever post-Soviet authors project into the past or the future, their goal is usually the understanding of the central trauma, or rather the catastrophe, of the Soviet period."[666]

Reconstructivism/New Meaning

In modernism, the idea of Origin/Cause suggests a clear source for events and creations, signifying a linear progression in history, culture, and art. This perspective values straightforward origins and causality. On the other hand, influenced by Derrida's concept of Différance, Postmodernism suggests that meanings are fluid, interdependent, and constantly evolving. This approach embraces the notion that what is absent (the Trace) is as significant as what is present, highlighting a shift from fixed meanings to an acceptance of ambiguity and multiplicity in interpretation. Deconstruction through differentiation, as Derrida's philosophical stance on meaning,

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[665] Laurie Vickroy, *Reading Trauma Narratives: The Contemporary Novel and the Psychology of Oppression,* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015, p. 157.
[666] Alexander Etkind, "Magical Historicism", in: *Russian Literature since 1991*, Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 104-105.

has certainly been the philosophy behind most postmodern narratives.

> "What is happening today in Russian and world culture can be viewed as an attempt to *reconstruct the edifice of humanism in the space of chaos.* Not because the testing of culture by death has proven the infallibility of humanism; on the contrary, the weakness and even absurdity of any belief in man is taken as an axiom. [...] And the ideal of the new humanism will probably not be man's harmony with the universe for a very long time to come but rather chaosmos, 'dissipative orders,' born within the chaos of being and culture."[667]

Stemming from the heritage of postmodernism, hypertrashrealism nevertheless embarks on the task of Reconstruction, as observed by Lipovetsky. Utilizing the fragments within *chaosmos*, the aim of the new narratives is to forge a 'new real' by infusing New Meaning into the multitude of old and new concepts.

> "Our real discoveries come from chaos," Brandy yells, "from going to the place that looks wrong and stupid and foolish."[668]

This notion aligns with the reconstruction of geopolitical relationships, the reformation of language through computer coding, and the redefining of existence in the post-Cold-War, post-Soviet, post-truth, post-culture, and post-climate-change realities.

> "Ludwig Wittgenstein once said that names are the only things that exist in the world. Maybe that's true, but the problem is that as time passes by, names do not remain the same - even if they don't change."[669]

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[667] Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos,* Edited by Eliot Borenstein, New York: Routledge, 2015 (first published in 1999 by M. E. Sharp), p. 247.

[668] Chuck Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters,* London: Vintage, 2003, p. 258.

[669] Victor Pelevin, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf,* translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2008, p. 3.

Minimal Religion

> "The way Walter saw it, he hadn't been slacking. […] He made a list of what he'd believed in:
> *Santa Claus*
> *Catholic God*
> *Baptist God*
> *Buddhist God*
> *Pagan God*
> *Satan*
> *The Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy*
> *The Seattle Sonics and the Oklahoma Outlaws*
> *Gary Hart and Walter Mondale and Al Gore*
> *Circumcision*"[670]

Through the relationship between the omnipotent, patriarchal, anthropomorphic force, God the Father, versus the metaphor of the divine existence, The Holy Ghost, Hassan elucidates the relationship between religion and modernism/postmodernism, respectively. This relationship acknowledges the spirit of oppression that Western Christianity and Thought have exerted over other religions. *Minimal religion*, as coined by Epstein in 1999, is a natural evolution towards spirituality within hypertrashrealism. It reconstructs the concept of belief for a post-atheist society, one that has distanced itself from old dogmas long enough to meld them anew in a melting pot of old and new religions, paganism, and global pop culture.

> "Spirituality, as it emerges from the ruins of totalitarianism, recognizes the dignity of diverse ethnic and religious traditions but is not satisfied by any single one. Rather it seeks to establish a sacred space across the boundaries of cultures. Through such a phenomenon as minimal religion."[671]

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[670] Chuck Palahniuk, *Adjustment Day*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2018, p. 56.
[671] Mikhail Epstein, "Post-Atheism: From Apophatic Theology to 'Minimal Religion'", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, p. 388.

Although minimal religion is more apparent in the post-atheist society of post-Soviet reality, it also applies to the American post-monetary reality amid the collapsing neoliberal economy and post-Yuppie culture. The phrase "In God We Trust" on US dollar bills (see Part III, Section: Marriage of Church and State of this dissertation, for further explanation of the phenomenon), once a testament to the monetary superiority of the USA and a powerful piece of anti-communist propaganda cloaked in religious garb, is now being reevaluated in the search for spirituality after the zenith of consumerism.

> "Когда он напомнил, что урки созданы Маниту не для мещанского прозябания, а для славы сражений и восторга молитв, Грым подавил первый зевок. Когда он забубнил об истинной вере («у них, ребятки, манитуизм только по названию, выхолощенный от самой своей сути, а у нас с вами – изначальный лазоревый...»), Грым стал клевать носом. А когда он принялся читать часовое «Слово о Слове», Грым вообще уснул. Он был такой не один. «Слово о Слове» все слышали много раз, начиная с дошкольных лет. Многие помнили его наизусть – и ничего не могли поделать с сонным рефлексом."[672]

New Sincerity

> "It's so hard to forget pain, but it's even harder to remember sweetness.
> We have no scar to show for happiness. We learn so little from peace."[673]

While modernists grappled with deep metaphysical questions, postmodernists, having witnessed destruction on an unprecedented scale, adopted irony as the preferred instrument of their cynicism. However, within the hypertrashrealist milieu, this irony

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[672] Виктор Пелевин, *S.N.U.F.F.,* Москва: Эскмо, 2012, стр. 102.
[673] Chuck Palahniuk, *Diary*, New York: Anchor Books, 2004, epub, p. 335.

has begun to yield to the New Sincerity movement. This shift is evident both in the West and the East, with each region developing its unique response to historical events.

Ellen Rutten, in her study *Sincerity after Communism*,[674] investigates New Sincerity, urging the consideration of this movement within both post-Soviet and post-9/11 contexts. She presents it not as a series of isolated phenomena, but as interconnected movements. Rutten argues that New Sincerity is not simply a yearning for the past but a complex interplay of factors: sincerity as a means of collective healing, the commercialization of emotions, and a response to the digital age. Informed by Rutten's insights, New Sincerity is here identified as an essential component of hypertrashrealism, serving as a therapeutic mechanism for cultural trauma and as an adaptation to the economic realities of our post-digital era. Building on this viewpoint, what is advocated for here is an exploration of how writers from both contexts have engaged with or resisted these trends. The New Sincerity Movement, in its rich variety of expressions, is as hyperrealistic as it is philosophical. Initially perceived as nostalgic or sentimental, it now seeks to harmonize irony with sincerity. It does not reject irony but rather harnesses it – along with playfulness, humor, and joviality – to articulate difficult truths and aspire to transcendence. The movement aims to carve out a space for a new sentimentality and a new reality, rejecting cynicism as merely a refuge for the disenchanted.

"Протест – это бесплатный гламур для бедных." [675]

Anticipation

"By indeterminacy, or better still, indeterminacies, I mean a complex referent which these diverse concepts help to delineate: ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation. The latter alone subsumes a dozen current terms of unmaking: decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decenterment, displacement, difference, dis continuity,

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[674] Ellen Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism, A Cultural History,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.
[675] Виктор Пелевин, *Batman Apollo*, Москва: Эксмо, 2013, стр. 183.

disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, de-definition, de mystification, detotalization, delegitimation – let alone more technical terms referring to the rhetoric of irony, rupture, silence. Through all these signs moves a vast will to unmaking, affecting the body politic, the body cognitive, the erotic body, the individual psyche – the entire realm of discourse in the West. In literature alone, our ideas of author, audience, reading, writing, book, genre, critical theory, and of literature itself, have all suddenly become questionable. And in criticism? Roland Barthes speaks of literature as 'loss,' 'perversion,' 'dissolution'; Wolfgang Iser formulates a theory of reading based on textual 'blanks'; Paul de Man conceives rhetoric – that is, literature – as a force that 'radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration'; and Geoffrey Hartman affirms that 'contemporary criticism aims at the hermeneutics of indeterminacy.'"[676]

Ihab Hassan's dichotomy of Determinacy and Indeterminacy in relation to modernism and postmodernism is compared with anticipation as an element of hypertrashrealism. Here, anticipation does transcend the uncertainty (indeterminacy) but without regressing to the 19th century determinism. It is instead congruent with potentialism, unveiling the new realms of potential for action.

As philosopher Robert Rosen suggests in *Anticipatory Systems: Philosophical, Mathematical, and Methodological Foundations*, the natural response of biological systems to their environment exemplifies this proactive approach. For instance, one might preemptively leave the woods upon spotting a bear, anticipating the potential dangers of an encounter, hence altering one's current actions based on predictive models.[677]

Such anticipatory behavior is not limited to biological systems; it's also foundational to artificial intelligence and machine learning, where digital systems are

[676] Ihab Hassan, "Postface 1982: Toward a Concept of Postmodernism", in: *Critical Essays on American Postmodernism,* Edited by Stanley Trachtenberg, New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1995, p. 88.
[677] Robert Rosen, *Anticipatory Systems: Philosophical, Mathematical, and Methodological Foundations,* New York: Springer, 2012, p. 7.

programmed to predict and adapt to patterns.[678] This concept is metaphorically captured in Palahniuk's *Diary*:

> "Harrow said, 'You always keep a diary. In every incarnation. That's how we can anticipate your moods and reactions. We know every move you'll make.'"[679]

Hypertrashrealism, therefore, moves beyond the realm of deconstructive terminology. Instead of fixating on *decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decomposition* etc., hypertrashrealists engage with concepts of recreation, reintegration, reconstruction, recomposition etc.. These terms reflect a dynamic process of continual renewal rather than a single finite event.

> "In actual fact, all the changes that happen in the world only take place because of such highly sensitive scoundrels. Because, in reality, they do not anticipate the future at all, but shape it, by creeping across to occupy the quarter from which they think the wind will blow. Following which, the wind has no option but to blow from that very quarter."[680]

In essence, anticipation in hypertrashrealism is about proactive engagement with the future, forging a constructive path through the remnants of the past. It is an approach that sees potential in what lies ahead, using our understanding of trends and patterns not just to react to change, but to actively participate in its making.

Transimmanence

> "Pop and silence, or mass culture and deconstruction, or Superman and GODOT – or as I shall later argue, immanence and indeterminacy – may all be

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[678] ibid., p. 191.

[679] Chuck Palahniuk, *Diary*, New York: Anchor Books, 2004, epub, p. 226.

[680] Victor Pelevin, *The Clay Machine Gun*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 1999, p. 36.

aspects of the postmodern universe. But all this must wait upon more patient analysis, longer history."[681]

Hassan attributed the feature of Transcendence to modernism and Immanence to postmodernism, intertwining the mundane with the spiritual, and the material with the divine in the consumerist environment. In the quest for spirituality, employing the means of minimal religion, and confronted with the growing concerns for the longevity of the human species – threatened by its own hubris (the immense potential for destruction and self-destruction) – the divine exists within this dynamic of the sacred trash world and the possible transcendence from it through some form of transgression.

Drawing upon the philosophical groundwork laid by Jean-Luc Nancy, Anné Hendrik Verhoef employs the term Transimmanence to capture the intricate interplay between the sacred and the secular. Nancy envisioned Transimmanence as a state that transcends yet includes immanence, a concept where divinity permeates and exceeds the material world. Verhoef further explores this in the context of our post-metaphysical age.

> "The future, also the predictable future (or 'already-not yet' future), is in transimmanence nothing more than the 'outside within': the ceaseless product of coexisting and co-originating, where meaning cuts across our existence with others. In this sense, transimmanence indeed involves a reconceiving of transcendence in our post-metaphysical age, which forms the ground of humility and not of authority, certainty or oppression. Eschatology can in this light be much more open, inviting, preliminary, and meaningful."[682]

Both Palahniuk's and Pelevin's novels offer a rich tapestry of ideas that resonate with the themes of transgression, transcendence, and the reconstruction of spirituality within the context of hypertrashrealism and postmodern consumer culture. In *Choke*,

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[681] Ihab Hassan, "Postface 1982: Toward a Concept of Postmodernism", in: *Critical Essays on American Postmodernism,* Edited by Stanley Trachtenberg, New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1995, p. 82.
[682] Anné Hendrik Verhoef, "Transimmanence and the Im/possible Relationship between Eschatology and Transcendence", in: *Religions*, Vol. 7, No. 11, Basel: MDPI, 2016, pp. 135: 1-15.

Palahniuk uses the protagonist's con artist tactics – pretending to choke in restaurants to elicit sympathy and financial support from others – as a metaphor for the human condition of seeking connection and meaning in a disenchanted world. The character's fraudulent, "trash" acts can be seen as transgressions that ironically attempt to transcend the mundane through minimal religion or spirituality.

The Clay Machine Gun, on the other hand, delves into the fluidity of identity and reality through the experiences of its protagonist during and after the Russian Civil War, and in his journey through various psychological states. Pelevin plays with historical narrative and metaphysical explorations, where the characters' search for meaning and personal identity often leads them through layers of reality and illusion. This aligns with the concept of Transimmanence, as the characters in Pelevin's novel navigate the "outside within" – constantly coexisting and co-originating with the different versions of themselves and their realities. The novel's interweaving of historical events with the protagonist's hallucinatory experiences underscores the continuous interplay between the concrete and the spiritual, the real and the imagined.

> "'So it's Aristotle, is it?' said Maria. 'I thought he looked pretty serious. God knows why. Probably the first thing they came across in the junk-room.'
> 'Don't be stupid, Maria,' said Volodin. 'Nothing happens by accident in here. Just a moment ago you were calling things by their real names. What are we all doing here in the madhouse? They want to bring us back to reality. And the reason we're sitting here drawing this Aristotle is because he is that reality with the Mercedes-600s that you, Maria, wanted to be discharged into.'"[683]

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[683] Victor Pelevin, *The Clay Machine Gun*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 1999, p. 108.

"What indeed is left for humanity to do, now that its history has been taken away from it? Is it now time to play?"[684]

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[684] Alexander Genis, "Perestroika as a Shift in Literary Paradigm", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, p. 102.

Conclusion

"How long until someone dissects the culling song and creates another variation, and another, and another? All of them new and improved. Until Oppenheimer invented the atom bomb, it was impossible. Now we have the atom bomb and the hydrogen bomb and the neutron bomb, and people are still expanding on that one idea. We're forced into a new scary paradigm."[685]

"I'm a Barbie girl, in the Barbie world, life is plastic, it's fantastic."[686]

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The final stage of this dissertation was written during the *Barbenhaimer frenzie*, that is, during the simultaneous release of two Hollywood blockbusters, *Barbie*, directed by Greta Gerwig and co-written with Noah Baumbach and *Oppenheimer*,

[685] Chuck Palahniuk, *Lullaby*, New York: Anchor Books, 2003, p. 42.
[686] Barbie Girl – Aqua, from the album Aquarium, Universal, 1997.
Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZyhrYis509A
[687] Cover photo from the article *What 'Barbie' and 'Oppenheimer' have in common,* Huck magazine, August 2023.
Source: https://www.huckmag.com/article/what-barbie-and-oppenheimer-have-in-common

directed and written by Christopher Nolan. Without delving into any analysis of these two films, it is intriguing to note this phenomenon of reignited interest in the topics like simulacrum and hyperreality and the ethics of nuclear weapon development. Ironically enough, these topics occur within the Hollywood-crafted capitalist framework of entertainment and commodification. These two figures – more accurately, one figure and one figurine – serve as important emblems of both the postmodern era and the Cold War period, contributing to our reinterpretation of these concepts in the context of the 21st century.

Regardless of whether we consider Jameson's fundamental correlation between postmodernism and late capitalism, Hutcheon's *historiographic metafiction,* Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality, or Harvey's emphasis on the plasticity of human experience, we cannot ignore the inherent link between the late 20th-century postmodernism and the transformative events that led up to it and continued beyond. If, historically, postmodernism was a backlash to the modernist futile attempt to provide a solid structure, to cleanse the form and shape it in accord with the idealistic illusion of human experience, it could be seen as both the appreciation and mocking of the past ideals. It is as if modernism was re-evaluated by postmodernists as a naïve hubris of the Anthropocene, amused by how architecture of Corbusier was followed both by that of Ricardo Bofil and that of Las Vegas. Although there is no simplistic way to describe the major cultural eras of 20th century, it is safe to say that modernism attempted to allow great optimism in trying to conquer both nature and God by romanticizing human rationalism, thus positioning modernism perhaps as an intrinsically utopian narrative. As Graff points out,

> "Romantic and modernist writing expressed a faith in the constitutive power of the imagination, a confidence in the ability of literature to impose order, value, and meaning on the chaos and fragmentation of industrial society. This faith seemed to have lapsed after World War II."[688]

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[688] Gerald Graff, "The Myth of the Postmodern Breakthrough", in: *Critical Essays on American Postmodernism,* Edited by Stanley Trachtenberg, New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1995, p. 70.

Seen in this light, postmodernism can be more readily grasped for its characteristics of gamefulness, irony, pastiche, intertextuality, cynicism, and self-consciousness. Emerging in the wake of existential fears like self-extinction, the Cold War dichotomy, oil-driven economies, and global power dynamics, as well as grappling with the advent of new media and the fragmentation of reality, postmodernism evolved in response to a series of intensifying factors. For all the same reasons, 21st century cannot fully break from postmodernism, as much as can no longer firmly hold to it.

> *"Have you seen the hit of the last Venice Biennale – the haystack in which the first Belarussian postmodernist, Mikolai Klimaksovich, hid from his local police inspector for four years? Alexander called this work plagiaristic and told Brian about the similar haystack famously used before the revolution by Vladimir Lenin. Brian observed that repetition is not necessarily plagiarism, it is the very essence of the postmodern, or – to put it in broader terms – the foundation of the modern cultural gestalt, which is manifested in everything, from the cloning of sheep to remakes of old movies, for what else can you do after the end of history? Brian said it was precisely Klimaksoviich's use of quotation that made him a postmodernist, not a plagiarizer. But Alexander objected that no quotations would ever have saved this Klimaksovich from the Russian police, and history might have come to an end in Belarus, but there was no sign of it breaking down yet in Russia.*[689]

Therefore, as evidenced by the themes of 'Barbie' and 'Oppenheimer,' we cannot simply discuss a radical narrative shift or categorize new developments strictly as a backlash or mere continuation of postmodernism. The coordinates from late 20th century are still very much present, however, we have now made peace with them as our inevitable reality. The world is increasingly hyper, in its economy, its culture and its everyday reality, just as it is increasingly surrounded by garbage and plastic.

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[689] Victor Pelevin, *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, translated by Andrew Bromfield, London: Faber and Faber, 2008, p. 188.

"The world which we inhabit is not constituted solely by a living but also by a thinking environment. The noosphere (the sphere of reason), however, is just as polluted by the waste of intellectual production and ideological activity as is the biosphere by industrial waste. What then is this ecology of thinking?"[690]

The 21st century came as a hangover from the 20th, and hangover usually implies facing reality with a headache; if we were once trying to dissect the age of self, now we are dissecting the age of selfie. Pluralism of thought is facing extreme comminution, as almost every single individual was provided with a public platform of expression through social media and virtual spaces and the space for (non-)aesthetic interventions in physical space, due to the accessibility of printing and democratization of self-made graphic design in public space.

The dialectics of this period should allow the break with the old definitions, at least in its naming. If the postmodernism was once a fluid term, open to many debates and interpretations, it is now solidified as the definite part of our inevitable cultural ethos, which does not mean it stopped evolving.

To go back to the initial set of questions presented as the objectives of the study:
- How have themes of transgression, disruption, and fragmentation evolved in the works of Palahniuk and Pelevin from the postmodern to the contemporary era?
- How does the distinct writing style in the works of Chuck Palahniuk and Victor Pelevin suggest *hypertrashrealism* as a transnational literary tendency?
- What distinguishes the *hypertrashrealism* from modernism and postmodernism?

The hypotheses drawn as the answers to the thesis questions would be:
- Transgression, Disruption and Fragmentation, which could be found in the work of both authors but also as the cohesive link between postmodernism and

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[690] Mikhail Epstein, "The Ecology of Thinking", in: *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture,* Mikhail N. Epstein, Alexander A. Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, p. 158.

literary narratives of 21st century, have further evolved through the effects of economic and existential acceleration and virtual reality.

- By mapping the similarities in context, style ,and usage of literary elements by authors from the opposite cultural milieus, it is possible to define a new literary tendency of 21st century, formulated as *hypertrashrealism*, which should be further examined in the prose of other contemporary global writers.

- Based on the Ihab Hassan's deconstruction of postmodernism in comparison to deconstruction of modernism, in their respective elements, a further comparison has been drawn to define elements of *hypertrashrealist* narratives, namely: Crapularity/Nihilism, Recycled Form (fragmenting, modular), Gamification, Algorithm, Transgression, Acceleration/Repetition, Simulacrum, Disruption, Recreation/Reconstruction, Metathesis, Oversaturation, Patchwork, Parody/Wordplay, Computational Linguistics/NLP, Modality (Human–Computer Interaction), Word Processing, Synecdoche, Repetition and Recombination, Mutation/Cyberspace, Open-Ended Apperception / Rereading, Floating Signifier, Screenable (Spectatorly), Hyper-narrative/Pseudo-Histoire, Code-switching, Truth/Cure, Glitch, Technosexual/Cyborg, Dissociative Identity Disorder, Reconstructivism/New Meaning, Minimal Religion, New Sincerity, Anticipation, Transimmanence.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

The Baudrillard's hyperreal in *hypertrashrealism* aims to deny a total shift from postmodernism to some new form of realism. Greenwald Smith makes a similar argument against the claim of Sam Tanenhau in the New York Times article that Franzen work was a signal that we can finally break from postmodernism.[691] The suggested *loss of affect* of Ballard or *waning of affect* of Jameson is here confronted with the problematic claim that such a shift towards a new realism brings back human

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[691] Rachel Greenwald Smith, "Postmodernism and the Affective Turn", in: *Twentieth Century Literature*, Fall/Winter 2011, Vol. 57, No. 3/4, Postmodernism, Then (Fall/Winter 2011), Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, pp. 423-446.

emotions where cold tonality of postmodernism once was. These claims keep us in simplistic binarities in which the presence of affect is a benchmark for determining the presence or absence of humanity. (How do we examine affect of a traumatized person, for instance? Would the suggested absence of affect in *Gravity's Rainbow* suggest the lack of humanity (clearly not?))

By acknowledging a realism of some sort, *hypertrashrealism* thus does not deny a romantic and much needed turn towards emotions and sincerity, but the tonality of them is not so simplistically *warm*, but it rather acknowledges their possible rise from the inconceivable amount of hypertrash circumstances. We can no longer escape towards the modernist utopia, because even the finest gems of modernism, let's say in architecture, are most probably covered with some home-printed personal ads, typed in Comic Sans font, offering *kamagra on sales.* By molding our reality to each and every personal needs, within the chaos of accumulated trash, we no longer have the urge to position our culture with respect to some utopian ideal. Instead, we have been made to except the postmodern reality that implies the mix of profound, trivial and prophane; the mix of harmony, kitsch and kemp. It is from this acceptance and confrontation that we examine the complexity of humanity in all its strangely intertwined shades, acknowledging the once important binarities and dichotomies, and anathemizing them just the same

Image Credit: Disney / Clipart

You Can Now Pay to Have Your Face on Disney's Cinderella Castle[692]

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[692] Source: https://www.disneyfanatic.com/cinderella-castle-mural-of-memories-magic-kingdom-js1/

In an essay published in 2014 November online issue of World Literature Today, Vera Shamina and Tatyana Prokhorova made the comparison between a several Russian authors, Victor Pelevin, Sergei Minayev, and Oleg Sivun, and the US author Chuck Palahniuk, diagnosing undeniable similarity in themes and styles within the global aspect of consumerism, commodification and simulacrum mode of existence, but also the absolute necessity to compare them in a wider context. Stressing the reaction of protagonists of all the above-mentioned writers to the *brave new world*, they follow the similar logic of addressing the matter of contemporary dystopia and the narratives that followed.

> "Generally speaking, the picture drawn in all these novels, both Russian and American, may seem quite gloomy, but the fact that writers living in different parts of the world have similarly diagnosed the disease of their generation and are beating the alarm gives hope. This is probably the first step toward recovery."[693]

With similar intention in mind, focused on two authors from *both sides of the Cold War*, this thesis examines the inheritance of global schism as the catalyzer for the alleged post-postmodernist developments. In the attempt to define important elements of *hypertrashrealism*, it specifically addressed three of them – transgression, disruption and fragmentation as elements that are specifically inherited from postmodernism and further transformed within the contemporary context.

The comparison of transgression, disruption and fragmentation in postmodernism and hypertrashrealism has to acknowledge the historical comparison of 20th and 21st century as the centuries of utopian illusions and dystopian disillusionment. Travelling through the false climax of civilization in the aftermath of industrialization we are comparing the disproportional demographic growth, the longest lifespan in humans and the triumph of technology only through the disillusioned grasping of the unfathomable consequences of climate change, social inequalities and corporate power.

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[693] Vera Shamina and Tatyana Prokhorova, "Russian Kinsmen of Chuck Palahniuk", in: *World Literature Today,* Vol. 88, No. 6, Norman: Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, 2014 (web exclusive: no page reference).

Therefore, the transformation of these literary elements needs to be acknowledged not only with respect to the shift between cultural movements, but also through the transformed understanding of the very idea of civilizational achievement – thus the very idea of utopia and dystopia. As mentioned before, the 21ˢᵗ century globalized human experience revealed that all previous nuanced differences are now flattened out within the global capitalism. For this reason, the search for self as seen in the work coming from both sides of former Iron Curtain is equally complex and burdensome, surrounded by same walls, myths, brands, ads, and illusions. Palahniuk and Pelevin both reach for transgression that is reactive to the unavoidable monetary reality, whether it is attack on the body, on the environment or the system. The novel presents itself as shocking, mocking or deeply satirical, allowing the hypertrophied trash environment to get into the spotlight, without blocking the new and distinctive literary elements.

As Daniel Cojocaru points out analyzing violence and dystopia in contemporary dystopian narratives, the constant violence in the novel *Fight Club* seems to transcend the dull simulation of capitalism.[694] Examined through such a perspective, it is easy to conclude that majority of transgressive acts in both Palahniuk and Pelevin work seem to be positioned against or towards the monetary existence. However, as Liudmila Safronova points out, the background of Pelevin's characters' passion for money reveals fears as the actual drivers, while money amassing as its mere psychological manifestation.[695] Perhaps the hyper- nature of hypertrashrealist narratives points out to the contrasting simplification of identity manifestation – before racial, gender, sexual, political, national or religious identity – the monetary identity is what comes forward as the most defining one. Thus, the ultimate transgression comes from breaking with such a plainly monetary coordinates and the violence that it inevitably implies.

On the other hand, virtual reality, robotics, artificial intelligence, Internet of Things and other technological advancements that penetrated our daily lives have

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[694] Daniel Cojocaru, *Violence and Dystopia, Mimesis and Sacrifice in Contemporary Western Dystopian Narratives*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, p. 77.

[695] Liudmila Safronova, "The Metaphysics of Numbers in the Eurasian Artistic Mentality: Viktor Pelevin's *The Dialectics of the Transition Period (From Nowhere to No Place)*", in: *Facets of Russian Irrationalism between Art and Life*, Edited by Olga Tabachnikova, Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2016, pp. 475–495.

drastically changed the nature of fragmentation – if it was once the consequence of the disintegration of reality (through destruction and totality of the nuclear bomb effects), now it is the consequence of the constant split in our attention created by our interaction with numerous software and machines (or even just a large number of open tabs in our web browser). But then, through the layers of totalitarian corporate power and disruptive nature of our interaction with machines, transgression diverts towards a new path, marching through a landfill of waste, information overflow and accelerated experiences towards the new modes of disruption and the search for the new definitions of self. In the search for a more resonant expression, this new form of realism does not ignore the postmodern irony and pastiche nor the piled rubbish of yesterday. It rather aims to blend them with the rediscovery of the sincere acknowledgment and reevaluation, which rises from the heart of the landfill depths.

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Appendix

A Short Summary

Marija Pavlović's dissertation, *Cold War Kids in Neoliberal Dystopia: Transgression, Disruption, and Fragmentation in the Work of Chuck Palahniuk and Victor Pelevin*, examines the evolution of transgression, disruption, and fragmentation in literature from postmodernism to contemporary forms. Introducing *hypertrashrealism*, she articulates this new literary movement as both a response to and a development beyond postmodern tendencies. The study significantly draws on Ihab Hassan's theory of postmodernism, providing a comparative framework that underscores key shifts in narrative and thematic approaches in the works of Palahniuk and Pelevin. This analysis emphasizes the critical transformation in literary styles and themes, reflecting contemporary societal and cultural dynamics, aiming to define a contemporary narrative alternative to the exhausted term "postmodernism" and the cumbersome "post-postmodernism."

Eine Kurzzusammenfassung

Marija Pavlovićs Dissertation, *Kinder des Kalten Krieges in neoliberaler Dystopie: Transgression, Störung und Fragmentierung im Werk von Chuck Palahniuk und Victor Pelevin*, untersucht die Evolution von Überschreitung, Störung und Fragmentierung in der Literatur vom Postmodernismus zu zeitgenössischen Formen. Mit der Einführung von Hypertrashrealismus definiert sie diese neue literarische Bewegung als eine Antwort auf und eine Weiterentwicklung von postmodernen Tendenzen. Die Studie bezieht sich wesentlich auf Ihab Hassans Theorie des Postmodernismus und bietet einen vergleichenden Rahmen, der wichtige Verschiebungen in narrativen und thematischen Ansätzen in den Werken von Palahniuk und Pelevin hervorhebt. Diese Analyse betont die kritische Transformation in literarischen Stilen und Themen, die zeitgenössische gesellschaftliche und kulturelle Dynamiken widerspiegeln, mit dem Ziel, eine zeitgenössische narrative Alternative zu dem erschöpften Begriff "Postmodernismus" und dem sperrigen "Post-Postmodernismus" zu definieren.

Author's Short Biography

Marija Pavlović (born 1984 in Leskovac, Serbia) holds both a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in English Language and Literature from the Faculty of Philology at the University of Belgrade, with her Master's thesis focusing on the dystopian elements in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and his essays. As an established Serbian author with an international presence, she has written *Horror Stories of Everyday* (Matica srpska, 2014), *24* (Partizanska knjiga, 2018), and the children's book *Zig-Zaga and Stork Boda* (Kreativni centar, 2021). Her novel *24* was translated into German and published in Austria (Drava Verlag, 2022). Pavlović has authored numerous short stories, poems, and art-lit works, including the drama *The Strange Case of Mrs. Jekyll and Dr. Hyde*. Her stories have been translated into German, Czech, Hungarian, and Swedish, appearing in various international magazines. Her collaborative art-lit work *Just Get a Wig* with Willi Andrik was showcased in Berlin in 2019, and her solo piece *The Dialogue* was featured at Luchana Theatre in Madrid in 2022. She has participated in regional and European festivals and initiatives and was a part of the four-year CELA program for European writers and translators, attending residencies across Sweden, North Macedonia, Austria, and Croatia. She was awarded with the scholarship for non-German writers for the year 2024 by Berlin Senate Department for Culture and Social Cohesion.

Selbständigkeitserklärung

PAVLOVIĆ, MARIJA.

Name, Vorname (bitte Druckschrift)

Erklärung zur Dissertation

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1. Hiermit versichere ich,

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