

Surviving Anew: Chuck Palahniuk's *Survivor* and the Disaster Genre

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Abstract

This article analyses Chuck Palahniuk's *Survivor* as an example of transgressive fiction, with a special emphasis on the author's style and method of rewriting and violating the conventions of the disaster narrative. As a transgressive novel, *Survivor* not only mirrors and comments on the social change of its time, but also betrays a specific literary subversion that moves it beyond the postmodern by its dialogue with American literary minimalism as well as popular culture. The novel is a first-person narration of Tender Branson, who is a suicide cult survivor, a servant, a pro-suicide advisor, a religious media celebrity, and a hijacker. Through the subversion of the disaster genre, *Survivor* emphasizes the perpetuity of the crisis, and presents storytelling as the final act of survival from the commodification of his life.

Keywords: *blank fiction, postmodernism, consumer society, Chuck Palahniuk, transgressive fiction*

Introduction

Chuck Palahniuk's *Survivor* is at the midpoint of the author's writing career that started with *Fight Club* and took a different direction after September 11, 2001. Therefore, on the one hand the novel incorporates the formal and thematic characteristics that have already dominated his writing, and on the other hand it signals the demise of his subversive writing of spectacular dystopias. Palahniuk himself categorizes his initial works as transgressive fiction. In response to a question at a conference at the Edinboro University of Pennsylvania he defines the genre as one "in which characters misbehave [...] and commit crimes and pranks as a way of either feeling alive or as political acts of civil disobedience,"¹ and dates the genre from the 1980s to September 11, 2001. His main reference for this closure is *Survivor*, whose dystopian plot almost mirrors the attacks, hence the cancellation of its film adaptation. Despite the apparent thematic recurrence of civil disobedience in *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters* and *Survivor*, these works have a particular formal character that echoes the American minimalist tradition. In his essay "Not Chasing Amy", Palahniuk mentions the formal aspects of Amy Hempel's fiction in a way that illuminates his own use of minimalism. Likening a story to "a symphony"², and thus focusing particularly on the way seemingly dissimilar

¹ This three-day conference on Palahniuk's fiction was filmed and later released as a documentary. I have transcribed Palahniuk's definition of the genre for this essay. See *Postcards from the Future*, directed by Chaplinsky, Kölsch and Widmyer (New York: Kinky Mule Films, 2003), DVD.

² Chuck Palahniuk, *Non-Fiction* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), 143.

details in fiction can be employed to foreground the theme, the author highlights how the abundant details and repetitions in his work emphasize the persistence of storytelling against the depicted dystopia.

In contemporary literature, the system of representations governing consumer society and commodification has become the subject matter of a new narrative form known as “blank fiction”, with which the works of Chuck Palahniuk, Bret Easton Ellis and Douglas Coupland are associated. The body of works implied by the term has been alternately referred to as “the fiction in insurgency”, “new narrative”, “blank generation fiction”, “downtown writing”, “punk fiction”.³ In James Annesley’s words, these works depict American cultural life that can be described as “a preoccupation with violence, indulgence, sexual excess, decadence, consumerism and commerce”.⁴ Outlining a panorama of American fiction from the 1980s onwards, Kathryn Hume observes that “the most obvious shared element [in these works] is a glaring absence. In most of these books, we find no sense of a desirable future”.⁵ Similarly, contextualizing this particular period of American fiction, Malcolm Bradbury writes that it is “a fiction of a world of ritual life-styles, forms and conventions, in which, however, the forms are often the imprisoning patterns of a life pre-plotted and fictionalized by social powers and elsewhere”.⁶ He claims that such works of literature have an “acerbic”,⁷ ironical and delusional nature. Elizabeth Young also comments on this new generation of authors, writing that “they hoped [...] to tell the truth as they saw it, although it had become increasingly difficult to “see” anything, let alone render it in text through the blizzard of fall-out from an uncertain, nervously apocalyptic world”.⁸ Young contextualizes the generation’s literary production in the political and cultural environment of the 1980s, and in contrast to the period’s glamour she associates their innovation with “revolution”, using the subheading “Fiction takes to the streets” as her title.⁹

The critics who have analysed the literary works in this genre seem to focus on certain characteristics: irony, bitter tone, and a schizophrenic, dystopian and apocalyptic style. These aspects strongly illustrate Palahniuk’s writing, as well as his generation; however, they are also traceable in most postmodern works of literature. It would be hard to single out the characteristics of blank fiction in this sense, when compared to Don DeLillo’s or Cormac McCarthy’s writing from the 1980s onwards. In addition to their themes and tones, the writers of blank fiction can be identified by means of the language they employ. In his analysis of the genre, Annesley writes: “Using a language that seems to resonate with the accents of commercial culture, these texts develop formal dimensions that appear, in some cases commodified and in others, part of a wider engagement”.¹⁰ Annesley’s analysis points to the kind of minimalism Palahniuk uses in *Survivor*. Throughout the novel, commodification is verbalized by repetitive

³ James Annesley, *Blank Fictions* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 2.

⁴ Annesley, *Blank Fictions*, 2.

⁵ Kathryn Hume, *American Dream, American Nightmare* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 267.

⁶ Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press) 271.

⁷ Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel*, 271.

⁸ Elizabeth Young, “Children of the Revolution,” in *Shopping for Space: Essays on American ‘Blank Generation’ Fiction*, ed. Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney (London and New York: Serpent’s Tail, 1992), 20.

⁹ Young, “Children of the Revolution,” 1.

¹⁰ Annesley, *Blank Fictions*, 8.

phrases and an abundance of irrelevant details; however, the language employed also mirrors the novel's apocalyptic theme in the sense that all the details and repetitions function as the spectacles of an inevitable – almost intended – disaster. That is to say, in *Survivor*, a dystopian version of commodification engenders the theme and form, particularly as a transgression of the one produced and circulated in American media. The conventions of representing the reasons and consequences of the apocalypse have been established through the disaster narrative in American popular culture, operating on a formulaic set of generic rules in which the disintegrating order is mirrored as a spectacle and ultimately restored by the effort of a competent leader. In essence, Palahniuk's transgressive experiment in *Survivor* is a depiction of commodification as a dystopia and fiction as survivor against the narrative form and techniques of mass media.

Transgressing Form: Disaster Genre and *Survivor*

Fredric Jameson draws attention to the relative ease of imagining the end of the world as compared to the end of capitalism, adding that “we can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world.”¹¹ In this sense, representations of disasters in media offer an understanding for the crisis of capitalism. In popular examples, particularly disaster films, the definition, process and resolution of disasters constitute a narrative scheme in which a leader resolves the conflict, thus re-establishing the capitalist order. Because of such closure, characters involved in the narrative, such as the leader, the survivor and the victim, act as natural and indispensable elements. Moreover, although disasters are portrayed as events to overcome, they can also be interpreted as concealed fantasies. Slavoj Žižek argues that American society dreams about “a global catastrophe that would shatter their lives”,¹² and concludes that before the September 11 attacks, Hollywood disaster films pictured “the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about and that was the biggest surprise.”¹³ In this sense, with *Survivor*, Palahniuk's response to the conventional representations of disasters offers a social critique, which reveals and invalidates the way they operate.

The word ‘disaster’ comes from the combination of the Latin prefix “*dis-*” and the Latin word for ‘star’: *astrum*. The word denotes the sense of being born under an unlucky star; that is, it reflects a view of the world which portrays the unpredictability and inevitability of catastrophes. The etymology of the word also shows the incongruity between the coinage and today's usage: the original meaning involves a supernatural power that prepares or causes a natural disaster. Therefore, disaster implies a triggering power external to the suffering community, and casts a misfortune on the people who struggle for survival. Yet disasters are not to be overcome: they are inevitable, and their timing and duration are again up to the external force. What the survivors can do is not to live on without any trace or memory of the catastrophe, but to live through it. In this respect, disaster is a turning point which changes one's life radically so that one develops a new insight and perspective.

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, “Future City,” *New Left Review* 21 (May-June 2003): 76.

¹² Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2012), 20.

¹³ Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 18.

The process of survival constitutes the generic structure of disaster narrative: once the disaster strikes, surviving characters try to live through it; in other words, what they can do is to get out of the confined space that imprisons them. Yet the imagery of 'living through' requires one character to show the way out of this enclosed space. Therefore, the survival process causes the emergence of a hero to direct his followers through the disaster. In this context, the moment of disaster as the triggering force, entrapment due to disaster as enclosure, leadership as heroism, and survival as being born again recall a biblical apocalypse, and the hero is depicted as a saviour. Popular representations of disasters illustrate this triggering force with a reference to "the hand of God" in *Twister*¹⁴ or "God's big show" in *Dante's Peak*,¹⁵ which entraps a certain group of people in the remaining ruins of the disaster. Following the disaster, a technocrat (e.g. the architect and the fire chief in *The Towering Inferno*,¹⁶ the scientist and the general in *The Swarm*¹⁷) takes over the saviour role to rescue a selected group which stands for the microcosm of American society. When the survivors are finally saved, they are born again: they develop a consciousness that would teach them not to repeat their previous mistakes, and the ideal order, divine or secular, is consequently re-established.

Palahniuk's *Survivor* mocks this narrative scheme by presenting commodification as disaster, as opposed to a disaster as commodity; in other words, although disasters are represented by media as spectacular and sensational events for the audience's consumption, Palahniuk focuses on the experience of consumption and commodification. Furthermore, Palahniuk uses a failed hero as a saviour, and storytelling as the sole means of survival. The novel is the life account of Tender Branson, who is a former member of the Creedish death cult, and works as a servant and accidentally as a pro-suicide advisor. As soon as he gets involved in a mass suicide plot by an anonymous cult survivor, his life story becomes an object of interest for an agent, who eventually shapes Tender into a new religious celebrity. Mistaken as the perpetrator of the suicide plot, murders and physical assaults, he hijacks a plane and plans to crash it into the Australian outback. The novel is his life story recorded during the last moments in the crashing plane. Complying with *Survivor*'s apocalyptic theme, the chapters and pages in the novel are numbered backwards in order to resemble an apocalyptic countdown: the novel starts with the page number 289, and ends with page 1. The story line begins with the coming disaster, and is resolved through it in a circular fashion so that the initial causes and aim of the hijacking can be implied. Throughout the history of the disaster genre, this technique has been used for exploring the motives of the disaster or what prepares it, rather than offering a mere presentation of its ultimate and spectacular scene. In this way, the narrative centres on the means of survival, and as Stephen Keane maintains, the amusement in disaster narrative becomes not "what will happen" but "who is going to survive."¹⁸ However, this is not the question Palahniuk's *Survivor* makes its readers ask, because in the opening chapter we are introduced to Tender only, while he gradually releases the passengers and the pilot, leaving no other potential survivors on board. In other words, by using a reverse

¹⁴ *Twister*, directed by Jan de Bont (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 1996), DVD.

¹⁵ *Dante's Peak*, directed by Roger Donaldson (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 1998), DVD.

¹⁶ *The Towering Inferno*, directed by John Guillermin (1974; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2001), DVD.

¹⁷ *The Swarm*, directed by Irwin Allen (1978; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2002), DVD.

¹⁸ Stephen Keane, *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe* (London: Wallflower, 2001), 5-6.

chronological order and a single survivor as the first-person narrator, the novel draws attention to the act of storytelling as a way of survival. Therefore, *Survivor* reveals the means of representing disasters, survivors and the notion of survival.

The presentation of the disaster in the novel's opening chapter has two further implications: firstly, the novel foreshadows a prospective group of survivors as the microcosm of American society. Secondly, emphasizing survival implies the notion of an order to be restored, which is not only the physical organization of a certain setting, but also a political and moral order. *Survivor* illustrates this microcosm with anonymous characters, and contextualizes the orders they represent. This anonymity first appears with Tender's involvement in the Creedish Church, a cult which enacted a mass suicide. During a county sheriff's investigation for possible child abuse in the cult, Tender mentions the reasons for this anonymity: "It was some crazy anonymous allegation that families in the church district were having children and having children and having children. And none of these children were documented, no birth certificates, no social security numbers, nothing."¹⁹ Since the allegation is for paedophilia, the strategy implies breeding children for the sake of abuse as well as evading any legal action against parenthood issues. The anonymity in the Creedish Church is further highlighted by the naming policy: the protagonist's first name, Tender, is, as a rule, given to all younger sons in the community. According to the cult's conventions, the boys with this name are expelled from the community to do service outside, without any right to marry and have children. In other words, being already expelled from the church and adapting to social life does not grant him the right to have an individual identity independent from the cult's regulations. Once Tender starts working as a servant, his impersonality continues as he communicates with his employer over a speakerphone in the kitchen. While the church's disciplinary function diminishes, the employer acquires a controlling status without seeing or being seen. Tender verbalizes the frequency of the calls with a repetitive phrase: "The speakerphone rings while I'm setting the lobsters, three male and two female, no sperm, in the pot on the stove. The speakerphone rings as I turn up the heat just another notch. [...] The speakerphone rings, and I answer it."²⁰ The fact that the employer is substituted with a machine further extends the limits of anonymity, while drawing attention to the commodification of both the controller and the controlled. The lack of pronouns for the speakerphone and the sudden shift of the speaking subject foreshadow Tender's gradual accession to society and desire for an authentic identity. However, his submission to the cult's doctrines and his dialogue with the speakerphone offer him nothing but a prescriptive technical language in which he repeats what and how he was taught; in other words, Tender's dialogues position him apart and above society rather than helping him for his integration with social life. By lecturing on the laws of etiquette over the speakerphone, Tender attempts to distinguish himself as a speaking subject: "When the speakerphone goes silent, then and only then do I start. I ask the speakerphone, Are you listening? I tell the speakerphone, Picture a dinner plate."²¹ His dialogue with the talking machine establishes the way he relates to society, and further implies the development of his identity and leadership amidst a wide set of non-identifiable, commodified and physically dispersed individuals.

Tender's relationship with anonymous individuals extends with the wrong calls he receives from anonymous people who want to kill themselves. Intending to call the

¹⁹ Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor* (London: Vintage, 2003), 170.

²⁰ Palahniuk, *Survivor*, 267.

²¹ Palahniuk, *Survivor*, 266.

suicide prevention hotline, they end up hearing Tender's advice to carry out their suicide plans. The first time he receives a phone call, he comments:

To stand here and try to fix her life is just a big waste of time. People don't want their problems fixed. Nobody wants their problems solved. Their dramas. Their distractions. Their stories resolved. Their messes cleaned up. Because what would they have left? Just the big scary unknown.²²

Although Tender answers the phone calls, he rejects any responsibility for saving the caller in trouble. Moreover, despite his identification with a saviour role, he ironically accepts it for his household work and renounces it when it comes to saving a life. For him, the order he is entitled to restore daily is the employer's continuous crisis, epitomized by the housework, while getting one's life back on track is not part of his job description. Therefore, Tender's role as saviour develops gradually while he is still a servant: "The phone in my hand, I'm trying to get bread crumbs stick with my other. Nothing should be this hard. You flop the cutlet in raw egg. Then you shake it dry, then crumbs."²³ In moments of "the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents",²⁴ as Fredric Jameson puts it, Tender's position indicates a form of postmodernist schizophrenia, dissecting his daily routine and his desire. Still, his saviour role is established by another form of address:

It's the same with these suicide girls calling me up. Most of them are so young. Crying with their hair wet down in the rain at a public telephone, they call me to rescue. Curled in a ball alone in bed for days, they call me. Messiah. They call me. Savior. They sniff and choke and tell me what I ask for in every detail.²⁵

Rather than an inherent quality, "Messiah" and "Savior" are relative and positional functions, requiring the helplessness of one and the expectance of the other. In this way, all the callers and the employer share the same need for Tender's service, highlighted by how they "sniff and choke", a reference to the consumption of food, or more precisely, the consumption of Tender's primary work as a cook at his employer's house. It is apparently his desire to keep on answering the phone calls and to give pro-suicide advice, because inciting people to kill themselves "is a different kind of entertainment. It's a rush, having that kind of control".²⁶ However, Tender's verbalization of the saviour position is also ambiguous because it is not clear if people just call him or if they call him "Messiah" and "Savior".

Tender's saviour position is materialized by the time he gets involved in the entertainment industry with the help of an agent who becomes familiar with his early life in the Creedish Church cult. Tender's life story had already been revealed due to the police investigation on the remaining cult members with the suspicion that they might plan yet another mass suicide event, hence his inclusion to the Federal Survivor Retention Program. During the time that he works closely with a caseworker, he both reveals information on the cult and learns about the details of the investigation, which proves that the mass suicide event was actually murders in disguise. By the time Tender

²² Palahniuk, *Survivor*, 282.

²³ Palahniuk, *Survivor*, 282.

²⁴ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), 125.

²⁵ Palahniuk, *Survivor*, 279.

²⁶ Palahniuk, *Survivor*, 280.

realizes the murderer is his brother, he feels under threat and decides to sell his story to an agent who is interested in making him a media celebrity. With this sudden turn, Tender recovers from his consequent position as survivor and becomes the saviour per se. However, he experiences a physical transformation by steroids, exercise, diet and clothing. In the agent's words, he is "the American Dream [...] the constant-growth economy"²⁷ in his present image. The political aspect of his stardom is further highlighted in Tender's comment: "People shopping for a messiah want quality. Nobody's going to follow a loser. When it comes to choosing a saviour, they won't settle for just a human being."²⁸ As a result, Tender becomes more and more subjugated and dehumanized in this process, and in order to assume the saviour position he agrees to transform himself rather than transforming his environment or society. It is not only his physical appearance that is manipulated; he is made to voice a fake story of himself, which demonizes the cult with allegations of child abuse, incest, animal molestation and Satanism. Tender describes his experience of a television program:

The TelePrompTer tells me: [...] THESE WERE THE KIDS I SAT NEXT TO IN SCHOOL EVERYDAY. THE CHURCH ELDERS ATE THEM. WHEN THERE WAS A FULL MOON, CHURCH ELDERS DANCED NAKED, WEARING JUST THE SKINS OF DEAD CREEDISH CHILDREN.²⁹

Tender is not only bound to the context but also the *accentuation* of his pre-determined answer, as the first letters of three out of four syllables in the word "teleprompter" have been transcribed with capital letters. The whole text is also in capital letters rather than a sentence form so that it would be easier to see and read. His fake and irrational story appeals more to the public and is compiled into a bestseller book titled *Saved from Salvation*. In this sense, his saviour position relies on the assumption that he is a saviour from a cult that aims to save its members, but it is not clear by whom he is finally "saved" and from what the cult was intending to save him, hence the ambiguity of his own crisis. When this enigma is resolved, his saviour position is repudiated upon his confrontation with his brother, who is the murderer behind the cult suicides. Driving together towards Tender Branson Sensitive Materials Sanitary Landfill, which is a waste disposal site for pornographic materials, Tender describes the location:

The road is long and rutted from the rim of the valley toward concrete pylon at the center. Along both sides as we drive, dildos and magazines and latex vaginas and French ticklers cling together in smoldering heaps, and the smoke from these heaps drifts in a choking haze of dirty white across the road. Up ahead, the pylon is larger and larger, sometimes lost behind the smoke of burning pornography, only to reappear, looming.³⁰

Created for the cause of saving American society from pornography, the landfill can be reached by a road which is described as "rutted", therefore it is clear that many people have been visiting the location, which is also proven by the pornographic materials in heaps along the road. Yet in the midst of the disposal site stands a concrete pylon, which is a Creedish church memorial statue for the mass suicide victims, and although it is "sometimes lost behind the smoke of burning pornography", it constantly reappears. The landfill area, particularly the pylon, stands for the prevalence and persistence of the

²⁷ Palahniuk, *Survivor*, 136.

²⁸ Palahniuk, *Survivor*, 135.

²⁹ Palahniuk, *Survivor*, 106.

³⁰ Palahniuk, *Survivor*, 35.

crisis in American society. Described as “the wasteland”³¹ in which there is “not a tree”³² and “not a bird”,³³ this dystopian setting coexists with the order restored by Tender’s preaching as a saviour. In other words, society needs this space as sign of chaos, but keeps it out of sight. In addition, as the pylon is a memorial monument for mass suicide victims and the atrocities of the cult, it signifies the perpetual need for a new crisis for an even stronger order. However, the two examples here (pornographic materials and the pylon) are the products of the crisis, or more precisely, their representations. Therefore, to imagine their disposal into the “wasteland” due to a misrepresented saviour’s preaching means a failure to imagine the end of the very system of representations. It is in this context that Palahniuk demystifies Tender’s saviour image. When his brother reveals that abuse in the cult was making kids watch women during childbirth, and in his particular example, witness the death of his brother’s wife and baby, the image of the pylon becomes fully apparent as a sign of an invincible catastrophe. Experiencing a personal disaster in which the difference between life and death is blurred explains the futility and impossibility of Tender being a saviour, which is ultimately reinforced by his part in his brother’s accidental death. In an apocalyptic setting of recurring disasters, Tender ironically loses his heroic function and ceases to be a saviour.

In *Survivor* Tender Branson’s failed search for identity and fake connection to society also have political connotations, which are in contrast to the structural closure in disaster films. In their work on Hollywood films, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner write that disaster films “depict a society in crisis attempting to solve its social and cultural problems through a ritualized legitimation of strong male leadership, the renewal of traditional moral values, and the regeneration of institutions like the patriarchal family.”³⁴ The emphasis on male leadership is repeated in Keane’s discussion on the historical background of the genre. He maintains that “[...] disaster movies of the early 1970s were fully in keeping with the doubt and distrust engendered by Vietnam and Watergate; the films clearly wallowing in disaster yet offering alternatives in the form of strong leadership”.³⁵ Recalling the disappointment with political leaders in the United States following the two political crises, Keane argues that these crises reinforced the need for a reliable and competent leader. Therefore, the disaster films of the period can be viewed as allegories of the American political crises with the male saviour epitomizing the desired statesman, and as a symbolic act of resolving social crisis, because for Ryan and Kellner, the model politician offers “alternatives to wimpish whining, and democratic meddling”.³⁶ Palahniuk’s treatment of Tender’s character speaks both to the need and the irrelevance of the search for the kind of political leadership Ryan and Kellner refer to. As Jesse Kavadlo describes, Tender “is the opposite of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*: weak willed, weak minded, controlled mentally, emotionally, physically”.³⁷

³¹ Palahniuk, *Survivor*, 32.

³² Palahniuk, *Survivor*, 36.

³³ Palahniuk, *Survivor*, 36.

³⁴ Ryan and Kellner, *Camera Politica*, 52.

³⁵ Keane, *Disaster Movies*, 54.

³⁶ Ryan and Kellner, *Camera Politica*, 53.

³⁷ Jesse Kavadlo, “The Fiction of Self-Destruction: Chuck Palahniuk, Closet Moralist,” *Stirrings Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature* 2.2 (2005): 15; German word silently corrected.

However, this heroic leadership is also deeply rooted in American history and culture, and betrays a mythical essence through the depiction of superheroes. The myth of the American saviour entails an individualistic character so much so that this characterization serves to justify military solutions and a totalizing national identity, epitomized by the notion of pre-emptive war in the aftermath of September 11 attacks. Lawrence and Jewett discuss this aspect of leadership by maintaining that “American superheroes, in their striving to redeem corrupt republics or instantly adjust psychological problems, typically reflect values that are antithetical to democratic processes.”³⁸ In this way, the despotic character of the traditional American leader has been glorified through its popular representations and imagined as a requirement for disaster management, and thus has been naturalized. Therefore, Palahniuk’s novel can also be read as the ultimate failure of the American superhero. Since disasters are totalizing states of emergency, leadership and society’s cooperation form a social unity to resist the consequences of a disaster. *Survivor* responds to this by depicting Tender as a product of society, rather than its founder. To put it another way, Tender’s mock leadership does not cause a social unity; rather, his story is constantly rewritten and reproduced by social institutions.

Conclusion: Fiction as Survivor

Unable to fulfil the generic codes of leader/saviour, Tender cannot evade the allegations of murder of the caseworker, his brother, and cult members. His hijacking a plane and crashing it into the desert function as a way to evade criminal charges. However, the hijacking is also a getaway from his whole life, as predicted and expressed by a psychic: “She said to tell my life story right up to the moment the plane hit the ground. Then the world would think I was dead. She said to start from the end.”³⁹ That is, Tender’s breakout is predetermined and thus enacted. In Tender’s words, “I would escape the crash. I could escape being Tender Branson. I could escape the police. I could escape my past, my whole twisted, burning, miserable, snarled story of my life so far.”⁴⁰ What Tender is finally running from is his popularized and fictionalized life story which is itself a catastrophe, emphasized by its exhaustion, misery and complication.

Survivor’s resistance to comply with the enclosed disaster narrative signals a decisive shift in society, expressed with Tender’s description of his life story as “twisted” and “snarled”. The transition from Michel Foucault’s discipline society to “societies of control”, as Deleuze names it, brings along a spatial difference whose description can be found in the unsustainability of the disaster narrative as we know it. The crisis in “all the environments of enclosure”⁴¹ and “perpetual metastability”⁴² identify the foundation of the disaster narrative as well as contemporary society, since the portrayed catastrophe is either the result of a malfunctioning enclosed space or betrays the limits of a seemingly open space (such as in environmental or natural disasters). It is also a common feature of disaster narratives that one disaster triggers many, hence the perpetual setbacks along the way to survival. Consequently, *Survivor* is

³⁸ John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 351.

³⁹ Palahniuk, *Survivor*, 2.

⁴⁰ Palahniuk, *Survivor*, 2.

⁴¹ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (1992): 3-4.

⁴² Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control”, 4.

based on a typical disaster narrative in which several crises occur in and as a result of enclosure – in church, work space, family and finally the airplane. However, the novel's divergence relies on the transformation of the society it aptly depicts: as Deleuze puts it, the societies of control no longer deal with the binary opposition between the individual and the mass; but the transformation of both into “codes that mark access to information or reject it”.⁴³ In other words, survival from crisis would depend on establishing a network of relations rather than leading a way. The mole and the serpent, two animal metaphors Deleuze uses to describe the two different modes of society also mark the contemporary invalidity of the leader who guides the way for survival, and his replacement with mobility and perpetual transformation, hence Tender's “twisted” and “snarled” life story. In this regard, *Survivor* mirrors how crisis, survival and leadership are transformed in contemporary society.

Throughout the novel, one can observe Tender's mobility in a network of enclosed spaces, which he finalizes with the crash. This mobility complies with the change in society Deleuze identifies, and mirrors the rise of tertiary sector in economy, which refers to providing services. Half-way towards the desert, Tender lands the plane in Port Villa and serves food to the passengers on board: “I was running all over the cabin with my gun, trying to get the passengers and crew fed. Did they need a fresh drink? Who needed a pillow? Which did they prefer, I was asking everybody, the chicken or the beef? Was that decaf or regular?”⁴⁴ Tender adapts to various discourses and connects to society; therefore he does not offer an end product but he provides service and care. As a consequence, the order he would restore is not a renewed enclosure, but communication and social bond.

In *Survivor*, all the aspects of enclosure in disaster narratives are violated by Tender's escape, because he uses storytelling for his final escape from consumer society which he experiences as a disaster. More precisely, his hijacking is a break from a crisis in representation, since his suffering is not due to his life but his life story, constantly reproduced by social institutions. On consumerism, Guy Debord maintains that “all that once directly lived has become mere representation”,⁴⁵ therefore, in consumer society representation supersedes reality. Tender's last act of storytelling is thus an effort to be the subject of his own story. In this way, he turns a “mortician's report on American culture”⁴⁶ into a rebellious act. What distinguishes his own life story from yet another representation is its form: before the crash, Tender narrates his life story to the black box, which reveals the process of his stardom. In this sense, the novel tests the limits of fictional representation by laying bare the narrative device. The black box is also significant in that it contrasts with the spectacular and sensational representation of disasters. It is an information-storing device that one talks into but is doomed to keep silent until the aftermath of an air disaster. Whereas the ultimate spectacle of a disaster is the moment it occurs, all the conflicts in *Survivor* are inside the black box, which survives by its silence and minimalistic form. It is Palahniuk's imagination of the novel as a genre in an age of apocalyptic fantasies. In consumer society, or alternately the society of spectacles, the black box resists the accession and inclusion to the dullness of everyday life. Rather than a harmonious order, it calls for conflicts, because it is designed to witness, record and resolve them.

⁴³ Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” 5.

⁴⁴ Palahniuk, *Survivor*, 287.

⁴⁵ Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacles* (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 12.

⁴⁶ Eduardo Mendieta, “Surviving American Culture,” *Philosophy and Literature* 29.2 (2005): 394.

The problem with Palahniuk's black box imagery, however, is that a box is initially an empty space: it is simultaneously a potential space for carrying the unexpected, and a deserted space in expectation or loss of the content. Therefore, Tender having a black box to record his life story is his way of occupying an enclosed space in crisis, and claiming it as his own. Throughout the novel, all the enclosed spaces, such as the church, the workplace and television studio offer different versions of his life story. Although the device is named as a "box", hence a closed container, Tender's act of telling his own life story into it implies an attempt to overcome the closure set by his media, because the black box makes him an active and conscious participant over his life by voicing his life story. In this sense, storytelling and first-person narration indicate that Tender's account is a narrative by its own right, hence revealing the fictionality of the story presented by media.

In compliance with societies of control, the black box has the form of a complex machine, a computer whose system can potentially fail through "piracy".⁴⁷ Similar to the act of hijacking, piracy over the black box is what Tender does to reclaim his life story. In this way, the black box draws attention to an autonomous form, particularly that of literary works. Such an image of literature marks the foundation of modern literary theory as advocated by the Russian Formalists and the New Critics. In his reading of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn", Cleanth Brooks asserts that the depicted urn does not mean anything beyond itself; like a "sylvan historian"⁴⁸ it speaks without factual referents and expresses its own mechanism by correlating beauty and truth. In Brooks's words, the poem "takes a few details and so orders them that we have not only beauty but insight into essential truths".⁴⁹ In the same line, referring to the urn which carries the ashes of a suicide victim due to Tender's advice, Kavadlo finds allusions to Keats's poem and writes that "Palahniuk examines the ironic tension between the immortal perfection and perfectibility art [...] versus life's flaws and finiteness."⁵⁰ Yet although Kavadlo's analysis emphasizes the author's focus on the function and mechanism of the work of art, the characteristics of the literary form he points to do not resolve this ironic tension by containing it; by using a cremation urn to imply Keats's Grecian urn, Palahniuk emphasizes the exhaustion of the established form and order. For this reason, Palahniuk's fiction does not restore the order of representation in contemporary society, but reclaims and uses the fictional space in crisis so as to display its mechanism and violate it. Therefore, the new saviour is a pirate or hijacker, and not one who saves the crumbling order. The ambiguous ending of the novel illustrates its resistance to closure. Although the psychic predicts what Tender will do after hijacking the plane, the novel does not provide the reader with any information on his escape from the crashing plane. After the publication of the novel, Palahniuk explained that Tender escapes the crash,⁵¹ but the novel itself is left open-ended and unresolved. While the failure in Tender's heroism and the impossibility of a re-established order violate the conventions of the disaster narrative, the black box's function in Tender's escape from consumer society highlights the novel's transgression of the very notion of survival by

⁴⁷ Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," 6.

⁴⁸ John Keats, *Lyric Poems* (New York: Dover, 1991), 36.

⁴⁹ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1960), 151.

⁵⁰ Kavadlo, "The Fiction of Self-Destruction," 17.

⁵¹ "Chuck Explains The Ending of Survivor," *The Cult*, accessed May 6, 2014, <http://chuckpalahniuk.net/content/chuck-explains-ending-survivor>.

invalidating its leader-oriented, passive and enclosed structure, and offering an independent, active, and expressive one which defies structure. The reader may not be certain if Tender survived, but his recorded life story is the true survivor in the novel, whether it is found or not.

In his argument on the contemporary avant-garde, Raymond Federman writes that fiction introduces innovation not by the new ways of imitating reality “but because it exposes the fictionality of reality”.⁵² In Palahniuk's *Survivor*, the fictionality of reality is not only exposed but also reoccupied via the black box metaphor, which highlights the limits and potentials of fiction. While Palahniuk relates commodification to perpetual disaster, he also violates the established form of disaster narrative in contemporary American culture. In this way, the new in Palahniuk's fiction neither stems from the new in modern criticism, as what Eliot claims was taking place in tradition in which “the existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves”,⁵³ nor is a sheer continuation of the postmodernist debate in which reality is forever questioned due to its fictionality. By using catastrophe and survival as such in the foundation of his novel, Palahniuk transgresses the idea of an acerbic, dystopian and pessimistic apocalypse that should be warded off immediately when it strikes; instead, he points to the permanence of the crisis and symbolically resolves this crisis of representation with the black box. On the whole, Palahniuk's treatment of survival is sabotage against the established form of crisis and advocates the act of storytelling as life recorded in a black box.

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A supraviețui din nou: romanul *Survivor* de Chuck Palahniuk și genul literar al dezastrului

Articolul de față analizează romanul *Survivor* de Chuck Palahniuk ca exemplu de ficțiune a transgresiunii, punând accentul cu precădere pe un stil și pe o metodă auctorială care rescriu și violează convențiile narațiunii dezastrului. Ca roman al transgresiunii, *Survivor* nu doar reflectă și comentează schimbările sociale ale timpului său dar, de asemenea, subminează un tip specific de subversiune literară care îl mută dincolo de postmodernism prin dialogul său cu minimalismul literar american și cu cultura populară. Romanul e narațiunea la persoana întâi a lui Tender Branson, supraviețuitor al unui cult al sinuciderii, servitor, consilier pro-sinucidere, celebritate a mass-mediei religioase și pirat al aerului. Subversiv față de genul literar al dezastrului, *Survivor* pune accentul pe perpetuitatea crizei și înfățișează actul narațiunii ca act suprem al supraviețuirii într-o lume dominată de consumul comercial.