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DESTRUCTION IN SEARCH OF HOPE:  
BAUDRILLARD, SIMULATION,  
AND CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S *CHOKE*

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DESTRUCTION IN SEARCH OF HOPE: BAUDRILLARD, SIMULATION,  
AND CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S *CHOKe*

KURT D. FAWVER

**ABSTRACT**

Chuck Palahniuk's *Choke* is a text that perfectly constructs a world of simulation as theorized by Jean Baudrillard. However, rather than reveling in meaningless, if entertaining, hyperreality as Baudrillard does, the text attempts to find escape from the endless barrage of mediated images and information inherent in such a simulatory existence. It advocates an evolution (or de-evolution, as the case may be) of communication and signification, a willful ignorance of sorts, that will allow images to be reconnected with meaning and signifiers to be reunited with concrete corresponding signifieds. Following a line of postmodern literature begun by Pynchon and DeLillo to its logical end, *Choke* takes the next step into post-postmodern territory, abandoning nihilism and focusing, instead, on the hopeful pseudo-Romantic destruction and rebirth of images and signs.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I. MISSING REALITY, JEAN BAUDRILLARD, AND AN UNHERALDED VOICE.....	1
II. CYNICAL MALCONTENT OR CULTURAL SAVIOR?: CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF PALAHNIUK AND <i>CHOKE</i> .....	8
III. <i>CHOKE</i> : GUIDEBOOK FOR SIMULATORY LIVING.....	13
IV. VIOLENCE IS SOMETIMES THE ANSWER: BREAKING AWAY FROM THE SIMULACRA.....	24
V. A BEACON OF HOPE.....	35
WORKS CITED.....	37

## CHAPTER I

### MISSING REALITY, JEAN BAUDRILLARD, AND AN UNHERALDED VOICE

According to many post-structuralist philosophers and literary critics, reality has disappeared. Contemporary life is nothing more than an endless parade of hollow signs, simulations of a “real” world that may have once existed but has since been copied and perfected to the point of substantive disintegration. In several branches of post-structural theory, all that remains is a dizzying amalgam of hyperreal experience. The contemporary world is ever-increasingly becoming a tapestry of representations that, as Jean Baudrillard states, “has no relation to any reality whatsoever” and will, with time, become “its own pure simulacrum” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 6). Objects, events, and even personal identities all suffer from the same degradation of meaning; people, places, and things have become nothing but cheap forgeries of themselves. Indeed, in a post-structuralist universe every aspect of reality represents itself as its own unique creation but is, in actuality, simply a collection of mimicries that form an empty whole.

Decades ago, misanthropic sociologist, economist, and philosopher Jean Baudrillard began an all-out assault on the underpinnings of society that led to the nihilistic theory that reality is merely one complex simulation. Utilizing Marx’s economic principles and, to an extent, Saussure’s work in semiology as a foundation,

Baudrillard attempted to explain the repercussions of contemporary society's pathological desire to emulate and copy. He concluded that the perfection of simulation had caused a deterioration of meaning. The sign, as broken into signifier and signified, had been irreparably ruptured. Signifiers, "images" in Baudrillardian terms, "mask the absence of a profound reality"; they do not have a discernable relationship with any given signified or set of signifieds (*Simulacra and Simulation* 6).

At first, the Baudrillard's thesis would seem little more than a rehashing of Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism. However, Derrida viewed the signifier as infinitely expansive, encapsulating a vast universe of possible meanings and, therefore, being entirely unknowable. Baudrillard's theory differs in that the signifier does not "mean" anything; it is empty of all referential value. For Derrida, the signifier was so bursting with variable meanings that one particular corresponding signified could not be discerned and, thus, the signifier became terminally ambiguous. Baudrillard argues that exactly the opposite is true: the world of images, of signifiers, is without any objective meaning whatsoever. It is a wall behind which stands a void, in which case the ambiguity of the signifier does not lie in its infinite multiplicity but in its absolute hollowness.

From a Baudrillardian perspective, society can only function through the constant mediation of images. It would appear that "we can never break through to an unmediated reality, as there are only ways of looking at reality, which constitute its realness" (Hegarty 51). Because there is no genuine reality underlying Baudrillard's idea of images, all we are left with is "alterations in the perception of reality, and this perception is as much real as there is" (Hegarty 51). In other words, "reality" and meaning are only as "real" or meaningful as one perceives them. This "realness" attaches to an image or a

signifier through mediation. In such a scenario, someone else (the media, trusted family or friends) explains that, for instance, owning a BMW means “wealth” or that having a tattoo means “crime-causing.” Suddenly, to the individual who believes these perceptions of “reality,” anyone that owns a BMW is “wealthy” and anyone that has a tattoo is a “criminal.” Meaning has been mediated to that individual. Baudrillard theorizes that our entire world operates on such a principle of mediation; everything is simply simulating a realness that exists only through an outside source telling us that the simulation contains that reality. There is no escape from absolute subjectivity and, at base, universal meaninglessness. In a Baudrillardian world, such meaninglessness will simply continue to masquerade as increasingly more perfect simulacra and proliferate, becoming a labyrinthine nothingness that is divorced from any reality whatsoever.

Since the advent of Baudrillard’s bleak simulation-based theory, and even before, many writers have utilized similar ideas within their texts. Among the most scholarly heralded are Nathaniel West, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and J.G. Ballard. While all the members of the aforementioned group of writers have found favor with the “literary circles and... clubs of self-promotion and self-monitoring that highlights ‘worthy literature,’” another post-structurally provocative and deserving novelist, Chuck Palahniuk, has “not attracted a lot of critical attention” (Mendieta 394). This is much to the detriment of literary study since Palahniuk’s work, particularly *Choke*, beautifully adheres to the Baudrillardian supposition that the signified has disappeared and, in fact, builds upon the idea. Indeed, many of Palahniuk’s novels, *Choke* foremost among them, advocate both a violent evolution of Baudrillardian thought and a massive regression in



communication; such texts trace the path of simulation and mediation, but, in the end, veer away, toward a much more hopeful future.

*Choke* is one of a still-advancing line of postmodern American texts dealing with mediated reality and simulation. It is a direct descendant of literary mainstays such as Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* or DeLillo's *White Noise*, texts that are concerned with the nexus of information, meaning, and the shaping (or reshaping) of reality. Pynchon, for instance, writing before Baudrillard published *Simulacra and Simulation*, was among the first American authors to diagnose the glut of mediated images and information as a menacing or effacing force. Characters in his *Crying of Lot 49* are steeped in paranoia and a frenetic uncertainty caused by, in large part, the endless stream of mediated signifiers and "information" hurled at them. There is no touchstone of realness within the text and, as such, its heroine, Oedipa Maas, is swept away in a sea of insane plots and increasingly surreal, if not entirely simulatory, events. *Lot 49* ends without a reality resolution; readers are left in a void, never to know whether Oedipa's experiences were orchestrated by a vast global conspiracy, her own delusions, or a highly mediated practical joke. The text replaces reality with a massive, throbbing question mark. Thus, Pynchon partially prefigured the danger of a Baudrillardian world, but, as *Lot 49* reveals, constructed no plan to escape its grasp.

DeLillo's *White Noise* further elucidates upon the problem of mediated reality, revealing that simulation has become a practice in everyday American life and has even infiltrated identity formation. *White Noise*'s main character, Jack Gladney, creates his persona based on mediated images; his family recites ad slogans in their sleep. Within the text, even environmental disaster may be nothing more than a perfecting of false

reality. *White Noise*'s world is filled with little more than simulations and mediated signifiers, with no true alternative in sight. While "Delillo's protagonists tend to respond [to simulation and mediation] with atavistic recoil, seeking out communes, caverns, and other enclaves of pristine, primitive behavior," there is no greater vision behind their initial, knee-jerk response (Saltzman 809). Gladney, for example, attempts to murder his wife's ex-lover in a fit of primitive, simplistic struggle against the complex, mediated system of communication. However, by the end of the text, Gladney has become almost Baudrillardian, taking a "wait and see" approach to simulation, perhaps hoping that the storm of mass media will, one day, pass.

Palahniuk's *Choke* takes the next step beyond both *The Crying of Lot 49* and *White Noise*, offering both a diagnosis of simulation and an active mechanism for escape from its effects. For Palahniuk, just as Baudrillard suggested, signs and images have been entirely hollowed of inherent meaning. Palahniuk's novels are bursting with instances of missing and mediated referents, particularly in the realm of personal identity. Within *Choke*, for instance, most of the characters' identities are largely baseless constructs. Indeed, Palahniuk's novels represent a total Baudrillardian nightmare, a world in which no reality lies at the core of events, actions, objects, or even the self. Rather, the individual and every aspect of the external world is essentially a hollow simulacrum. Yet, despite this overwhelming emptiness of meaning, Palahniuk's characters consistently "attempt to forge something palpable and real in a world where everything is a 'copy of a copy of a copy' or 'the signifier outlasts the signified'" (Kavadlo 7). It is in these attempts at creating realness that the texts break with Baudrillard.

*Choke*, along with much of Palahniuk's other work, ultimately advocates a path out of meaningless simulation whereas Jean Baudrillard seems to embrace it. Palahniuk's final solution is to destroy the empty sign - to wipe the slate of culture and communication absolutely clean so that signifier and signified can be brought back into a meaningful connection. In a sense, Palahniuk's works are advocating a sort of primitivism. In order to escape the hollowness of Baudrillard's post-modernity, the world must be (in Palahniuk's fiction, sometimes quite literally) blown apart. For Palahniuk, a concrete correlation between signifier and signified, a rebirth of meaning, can be reached if a new set of signs replaces old signs. The old signs must be entirely razed, otherwise they will continue to proliferate and, inevitably, corrupt the new, un-emptied signifiers. Such a radical shift in communication can only be accomplished through a major restructuring of culture, a fact of which Palahniuk is acutely aware (hence the reason many reviewers consider Palahniuk's work to be simple social critique). In *Choke*, such restructuring begins with individual identity and cascades outward; the self is leveled and rebuilt and then, in turn, the newly un-emptied self attempts to level and rebuild culture.

Through the complete annihilation of mediation, Palahniuk's novels cut through the misty haze that Baudrillard has weaved around society. They chip away at the foundations of hollowness that support our contemporary world and open up discussion of new communicative and philosophical possibilities. Indeed, *Choke* contains a wealth of unique ideas concerning contemporary life and post-modern identity. When analyzed through a Baudrillardian lens, the text can enable further serious inquiry into the

possibility of evolving past the black hole of simulation and mediation into which Baudrillard's brand of post-structuralism has plunged us.

CHAPTER II  
CYNICAL MALCONTENT OR CULTURAL SAVIOR?: CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF  
PALAHNIUK AND *CHOKE*

Literary criticism focusing on Palahniuk is far from widespread and even tangential academic references to *Choke* are nearly nonexistent. In part because Palahniuk's novels are grossly mislabeled as "pop lit" that glorifies violence and revels in misogyny, most scholars have shied away from discussion of his body of work. The few critical inquiries that do delve into Palahniuk's fiction deal, in large part, with his most famous text, *Fight Club*. *Choke*, despite a massive density of ideas and an adherence to Baudrillard's simulacrum world, has been relegated to a backseat position in the burgeoning Palahniuk canon. Instead, the focus is set upon *Fight Club*, with its myriad issues concerning gender, the construction of masculinity, and consumerism. While *Fight Club* is, without question, brimming with topics for critical discussion, *Choke* remains virtually unmined by the scholarly community.

A small number of academics who have written on Palahniuk have understood his unique position within American literature and have not avoided his lesser-known works or his non gender-related concerns. Eduardo Mendieta, for example, has surveyed several of Palahniuk's novels and found that his work contains "a profound suspicion of

the system, of societal good intentions,” that “nothing hides behind the social concern for the individual other than the tyrannical imperative of society to maintain its grip on the individual” (Mendieta 407). Mendieta goes on to conclude that “Palahniuk’s novels are about surviving American culture, and about how deviance is the health of the individual in a sick society” (Mendieta 395). Mendieta is correct, to an extent. That Palahniuk’s work is suspicious of society and its pervasiveness is obvious. All of his novels subvert dominant American discourses and, in a somewhat Foucaultian manner, utilize marginalized characters and subjects to open up new discursive avenues. Palahniuk’s work also deals with escaping from mainstream culture, which Mendieta appropriately suggests. However, Mendieta only scratches the surface of why American culture, as represented in Palahniuk’s novels, needs to be escaped.

Mendieta correctly states that Palahniuk’s characters are “testimonies to the resilient power... to resist even the most invasive and persistent onslaughts by culture,” but dismisses this “invasiveness” and “persistence” too quickly, assuming that they are symptoms of American culture’s megalomaniacal nature (Mendieta 395). He does not sense that much more than the balance of power is at stake in Palahniuk’s work; the very nature of reality is at issue and only by examining Palahniuk in relation to Baudrillard can this concern with the fabric of meaning and realness be fully realized. Thus, while Mendieta does an excellent job of examining a broad range of Palahniuk’s work and diagnosing its primary preoccupations, a more focused critique is needed to take the next step and reveal the underpinnings of Palahniuk’s concern over the negative effects of American culture. It is this step that leads to the unavoidable connection with simulation, mediation, emptiness, and Baudrillard.

Refuting the uninformed sentiment that Palahniuk's texts, most prominently *Choke*, *Fight Club*, and *Survivor*, are nothing more than "ugly, existential, and nihilistic works," Jesse Kavadlo argues that Palahniuk's novels are actually quite hopeful and imbued with "closet morality" (Kavadlo 4,5). Kavadlo claims that even though Palahniuk's works are hiding "in the closet of postmodern apocalypses and existential absurdities," they are, in actuality, "old fashioned romances" (Kavadlo 22). Kavadlo believes that, through the destruction and the mayhem that litter *Choke*, *Fight Club*, and *Survivor*, Palahniuk retains a "moral imperative... that we must communicate, love one another, and survive" (Kavadlo 22). Such a reading is not without merit. Palahniuk's work does frequently end with hope and unequivocal romanticism. The violence and corruption portrayed throughout Palahniuk's texts are only used for the ultimate purpose of construction. Within his work manifests a cycle where destruction always leads to creation and death always leads to rebirth. Therefore, Kavadlo's argument is sound. However, it requires expansion. After all, Palahniuk's apparent hopefulness begs a question that Kavadlo does not answer: for what do his texts hope?

The response of "love" or "survival" is not adequate. Palahniuk's work has broader theoretical implications; his optimism is not simply grounded in a world where people of all races and creeds are holding hands and singing campfire songs. Instead, his positivity stems from the belief that a reshaping and rebuilding of realness is possible. Palahniuk's romanticism yearns for a restoration of signs to meaning, a sweeping salvation of reality from the clutches of simulation, all accomplished in one small step at a time.

Jeffrey Sartain takes *Choke* in an intriguingly strange direction; he moves its criticism toward science, chaos, and quantum theory. Sartain believes that there are characters and events within the text that act as “destabilizing, noise-inducing force[s] in contemporary culture, mirroring the shifting understanding of entropy in relation to information and culture” (Sartain 26). He utilizes ideas of polyphony, the wave/particle paradox of light, and even the self-organization of complex systems to conclude that Palahniuk’s novels view chaos and breakdown as “fundamental forces in the world” and advise the reader to “get used to them, or insanity might follow because of the futile fight against the underlying chaotic forces of nature” (Sartain 43). Sartain is insightful but somewhat misguided.

While many Palahniuk works such as *Choke* do surmise that disintegration, especially of the physical and of the self, is an important aspect of the world, it is not disintegration or entropy that rules the universe of the texts. Rather, Palahniuk’s contemporary world is a parasitic constructor, forever feeding off the past while building more layers of meaninglessness. The hollow societies Palahniuk’s novels depict are not teetering on the verge of chaotic collapse. Instead, chaotic collapse, an entropic hand, is precisely the spark that the texts embrace as a force of cultural erasure and, subsequently, change. Chaos is not inevitable, however; only through painful struggles against self and society do Palahniuk’s characters ever free themselves from the strictures of Baudrillardian simulation. Chaos is also not Palahniuk’s end point. Cultural and individual disintegration only opens a world of possibility for restructuring, and it is this eventual restructuring that most concerns Palahniuk. Thus, Sartain misses the crucial



point that chaos and entropy within Palahniuk's texts are only a means to a much more concrete, certain end.

The current criticism of Palahniuk's work barely scratches the surface of his primary theoretical concern. Baudrillardian simulation and mediation are absent from the scholarly discussion of Palahniuk's body of literature, yet his novels are bursting with instances of Baudrillard's theories in action. *Choke*, a veritable treasure trove of critical and theoretical application, has been glazed over as a minor addendum to the more recognized *Fight Club* despite the fact that the text represents a fully functioning Baudrillardian world and attempts to provide a path of extrication from that world. While a small number of critics have commented on the general sentiments Palahniuk takes toward the contemporary culture of simulation and a handful have even written about the tools Palahniuk uses to escape simulation, the criticism on Palahniuk and *Choke* is inadequate without a Baudrillardian reading and, ultimately, needs to be expanded.

## CHAPTER III

### *CHOKE*: GUIDEBOOK FOR SIMULATORY LIVING

In virtually all of his writing, Chuck Palahniuk gives evidence of his devotion to Jean Baudrillard, reworking Baudrillardian ideas with gleeful, and often darkly satiric, abandon. Such devotion is the keystone for *Choke*, Palahniuk's homage to simulation and mediation. Ida Mancini, mother of *Choke*'s main character Victor Mancini, comments that "We don't live in a real world anymore... We live in a world of symbols," a snippet of dialogue that seems to be pulled directly from the mouth of Baudrillard himself (*Choke* 151). Echoing Baudrillard at almost every turn, *Choke*, perhaps above all other Palahniuk novels, displays an acute understanding of simulation's role in postmodern society.

The text opens with a myth about a girl that "traced the outline of her lover's shadow so she would always have a record of how he looked" (*Choke* 4). From the lover's outline traced on the wall, the girl's father modeled "a clay version of the young man" and, from this system of reproduction and imperfect simulation, "symbols were born" (*Choke* 5). Immediately, comparisons to Baudrillard's orders of simulacra come to

mind. First, the lover exists with the girl, as a real individual. This parallels the notion that, perhaps somewhere, sometime, signs were imbued with reality; it is Baudrillard's initial stage, wherein "signs do not yet play with social 'reality' ... [they] are dominated by reciprocal and unbreakable symbolic order" (Horrocks 104). Next, the girl outlines the lover. This is equivalent to the first order of simulacra, in which the signifier "is freed and refers not to obligation but to produced signifieds" (Horrocks 105). Then the shadow is perfected, forged into a clay statue. Similarly, Baudrillard's second order of simulacra is "dominated by production and the series...[where] signs are repetitive, systematic... and make individuals the same as in the system of objects" (Horrocks 107). The pages of *Choke* immediately introduce three stages of the Baudrillardian order of simulacra for several reasons, foremost among them that the text's central premise hinges on the buildup and eventual breakdown of just such a simulatory order.

*Choke* revolves around antihero Victor Mancini's quest to learn his true origins, an insane saga rife with Baudrillardian simulation and mediation. Victor's self identity is a shifting, protean thing. Throughout the text, almost to its end, individual identity is mediated to Victor by his mother, Ida, a woman he believes to be Ida's doctor, Paige Marshall, and society at large. At first, Victor simply believes he is the dysfunctional child of a criminal mother and an absent father. He admits that "I don't even pretend to be myself... I don't even pretend to know myself very well" and, indeed, Victor initially has no capacity for self-realization (*Choke* 21). When he visits his mother, who is dying in a psychiatric ward, he doesn't even present himself as her son. Victor explains that "when I used to come as myself... her son Victor Mancini, none of those visits lasted ten minutes" but, when Ida believes Victor is Fred Hastings, one of her old attorneys, "her

face opens up... she laughs... [and] she talks” (*Choke* 22). Victor creates an elaborate identity for Fred, devising stories about his children, his wife, and his home, all of which Ida follows with more interest than she shows in Victor. As a result, Victor is forced to simulate the persona of Fred Hastings in order to maintain any sort of relationship with his mother. As Victor, he cannot connect to her, but by simulating another identity, ‘Fred Hastings,’ Victor can be a part of his mother’s fleeting life.

Victor blatantly simulates the identity of other individuals, as well. When a number of patients in his mother’s hospital begin accusing him of crimes from their past, he takes on the roles they assign him. To one elderly woman, he simulates the identity of her rapist older brother; to another woman he simulates the identity of the man who killed her beloved dog. Victor believes that, because these people are old and need closure before dying, he is doing them a service; he believes he is martyring himself for their mental health. But, in reality, all he is doing is proving that his own being, his own self identity, is empty. He has no self identity of his own with which to help these elderly patients, so he simulates someone who can. To the patients, as well as his mother, Victor becomes something of a hyperreal being. His simulated identities “point to a blurring of distinctions between the real and the unreal” (Best 119). The rapist brother and dog killer he portrays are perfected simulations of the real people for which they stand. Victor’s simulated identities are not even close to approximating the identities of the original people he simulates, but they do not have to be; they function on their own, for their own purpose, as signifiers of reconciliation. The only “reality” these simulated identities signify is the reality that Victor mediates. In the process of all this healing simulation, however, Victor realizes that he’s become little more than a simulated individual. He

admits that “more and more, it feels like I’m doing a really bad impersonation of myself” (*Choke* 69).

From simulating personal demons, Victor jumps to something much stranger: anti-simulating. Victor learns from the supposed doctor Paige Marshall that his mother had written in her journal his true origins; he is, apparently, the artificially inseminated clone of Jesus Christ. However, he does not want the kind of daunting responsibility that would come with being the second coming of Christ, so he tries to do everything and anything that might be antithetical to Jesus’s society-mediated identity. Victor claims that he will prove “I’m no Jesus Christ” because “anybody’s true nature is bullshit” (*Choke* 155). Thus, he begins his attempt to anti-simulate Christ and, perhaps in a reciprocal way, simulate an antichrist. He has sex with various random women, nearly has sex on an altar in a church, and continually mutters the mantra “love is bullshit... emotion is bullshit... I’m an uncaring asshole and proud of it” in service of his new simulated identity (*Choke* 227). Victor’s self has become an overflowing vessel of mediated characteristics. He is no longer Victor; rather, he is simply a patchwork simulation of every behavior or trait that society has mediated to be “unlike Christ.”

After his attempt to un-simulate Christ fails, Victor tries the opposite: simulating Jesus. He knows this will be a daunting task and understands that, at his core, he is not Christ-like. Instead, he accepts a life that will be perpetual simulation. Victor muses that perhaps “Jesus Christ had to practice being the Son of God to get any good at it,” a statement that implies that neither Victor nor Christ are initially “a manifestation of perfect love” but must, instead, simulate the identity of the manifestation of perfect love to become the manifestation of perfect love (*Choke* 237, 267). In other words, neither

Victor nor Christ are, in reality, an embodiment of perfect love, but, with enough perfection and reproduction of perfect love's characteristics, they are able to pull off a convincing simulation of one. The text reinforces the idea of a simulated Christ when Victor's best friend, Denny, theorizes that "maybe God wanted us to invent our own savior when we were ready... maybe it's up to us to create our own messiah" (*Choke* 268). Such a messiah would be merely a simulation of whatever mediated images and characteristics have come to be associated with "messianic." Therefore, the world is left with saviors who are merely trying to perfect the signifiers of past saviors who may also have been simply simulating characteristics of "perfect love." The text is fully aware that even stolid institutions, God and religion for instance, are just copies of copies of copies with no underlying reality.

The hollowness of Victor's simulated identities becomes painfully apparent, and turns deadly, when he attempts a miracle at his mother's bedside. His mother has begun a regime of purposeful starvation; she is, in effect, committing a slow suicide. Victor, now desperately simulating Christ, cannot stand by and watch his mother fade away. So, he buys a pack of pudding cups and forces his mother to eat. He shoves spoonful after spoonful of chocolate pudding into his mother's mouth, even though she refuses to chew or swallow. Victor, however, remains oblivious to the fact; he is too caught up in his simulation of salvation. Due to the massive amount of pudding jammed down her throat, Victor's mother chokes. She cannot breathe with all Victor's pudding, with all his messianic simulation shoved into her mouth. So, she asphyxiates. In the process of his mother's dying, Victor commands her to live. He says that "just like with Lazarus... I've done this before" and, as doctors attempt to resuscitate her, he tells them "That's really

not necessary. *I am the Christ*” (*Choke* 270). But Victor is not Christ and Ida Mancini does die from Victor’s overzealously simulated act of salvation. Simulation has led to a total reversal of the signifiers’ mediated meaning; kindness is murder and salvation is death. In Baudrillardian terms, “everything that once meant an advance in the social turns into its opposite... conscience [and] caring... backfire” (Horrocks 140).

Paige Marshall is another character within the text that has a mediated, and simulated, identity. When Victor first meets Paige, she is clad in attire that has come to be associated with doctors: long white lab coat, clipboard, glasses, and neat, pulled-up hair. Based solely on her studious appearance, Victor assumes she is, in fact, a doctor. He relies on the signifiers of “doctor” to describe Paige’s identity. However, the signifiers of “doctor” do not correspond to any reality of doctor. In fact, Paige Marshall, despite her knowledge of medicine and Victor’s mother’s condition, is nothing more than a psychiatric patient. She is entirely deluded, even going so far as to tell Victor that she is from the future. Yet, throughout most of the text, Paige appears to be a normal doctor, reading charts and taking temperatures. Victor, and even the reader, does not necessarily question Paige’s identity because there are no obvious clues to her simulated nature. Paige simulates a medical professional so fully, so successfully, that it is not until the end of the text that her false identity falls away. Behind these simulations of “doctor” there may be no real Paige Marshall; when Victor says that “the smell of her isn’t roses or pine or lemons... it isn’t anything, not even skin,” he is alluding to Paige’s existence as a negation of an individual (*Choke* 90). In Paige Marshall, the text proves that simulation can often pass as unquestioned reality, especially in the context of personal identity.

Indeed, “in their eagerness for connection and community, Palahniuk’s characters tend to latch onto the ideas espoused by seductive individualist figures around them, becoming repositories and conduits for these other characters’ opinions and ideologies” (Sartain 27). By “becoming repositories and conduits” for mediated “meaning,” Victor and Paige allow their identities to be filled with simulated behaviors and characteristics and, in turn, perpetuate the myth of reality by attempting to portray these simulated traits as the “real” Victor and Paige.

*Choke*’s Baudrillardian simulation and mediation do not begin and end with identity, however. Victor’s sex addiction is one such example. He obsessively seeks out women for any act of sexual stimulation. For Victor, sex is not about pleasure or self-gratification, however. Rather, his addiction is based on a connection to emptiness. Victor explains that, while having sex, “I’ve got no problems in the world. No mother. No medical bills. No shitty museum job. No jerk-off best friend. Nothing. I feel nothing” (*Choke* 19). His sex addiction is tied to a desire for communion with nothingness, to shrug off the world of simulation, of meaningless symbols, and return to a basic truth: the hollowness of everything. While other individuals’ sex addictions may center on the mediated “meanings” of sex – a compulsive need for love or a megalomaniacal grab for power over others, for instance – Victor’s addiction hinges on the absence of “meaning” in sex. Victor’s sexual obsession is not about society’s mediated version of sex; it is about release and the unmaking of simulation.

Even the sex act, itself, is often fraught with simulation, as Victor discovers when he engages in a rape role-play scenario with Gwen, a girl he meets in a bookstore. Victor assumes that, on the preapproved night of the “rape,” he is supposed to simply hide in a



closet in Gwen's bedroom, wait for her to walk in, put a knife to her neck, and have sex with her. The first level of simulation here is that Victor obviously won't be raping Gwen because she has consented to the rape. Rape, by very definition, is a forcible act; no one is forcing Gwen to have sex with Victor in any way. So at its very core, the rape is not rape at all. It is a copy of a rape. However, when Gwen begins stipulate how the minutia of a rape should be set up and played out, the role-play turns to the absurdly hyperreal. Victor says that he "can't rape her on her bed" because "she says, the spread is pale pink silk and will spot... and not on the floor because the carpet hurts her skin... [and] not by the fireplace... [maybe] near the armoire, but not too near" (*Choke* 170). She is supposed to be tied up with rope, "but not nylon rope because it hurt too much... hemp gives her an inflamed rash... black electrical tape would work, too, but not over her mouth" (*Choke* 170). Gwen even becomes angry when she realizes Victor has used a pair of her pantyhose to cover his face. She complains that "every rapist I've ever been with has brought his own pantyhose" (*Choke* 172). The stipulations of Gwen's "rape" are ridiculous; she is trying to perfect the act of rape, to simulate it in such a way that it no longer resembles its original in any way. Her rape scenario is too mediated by her own ideas of what a "rape" should entail and, as such, it fails to replicate any real danger or spontaneity that may have once been connected to the act. Gwen's rape is, just as Baudrillard suggested, "its own pure simulacrum," with "no relation to any reality whatsoever" (*Simulacra* 6).

While engaged in the topic of sex, a mention of Ida Mancini's former profession is quite apropos. For lack of a better term, she was a hypno-pimp. Men came to her to be hypnotized and guided through sexual fantasies involving historically famous women.

She ran a “bordello of the subconscious” (*Choke* 212). Ida’s occupation, therefore, was based entirely in simulation. Victor remembers that his mother’s clients wanted “Indira Gandhi and Carol Lombard... Margaret Mead and Audrey Hepburn and Dorthea Dix... [the clients] didn’t even want to be real themselves... [they] asked for full, thick hair... muscle... tans... [and] a strutting, foot-long erection” (*Choke* 136). Clients would even ask for

“the three Bronte sisters. Not real women, but symbols, just their names as empty shells that you can project into, you can fill with antique stereotypes and clichés, milk-white skin and bustles, button shoes and hoop skirts. Naked except for whalebone corsets... here are Emily and Charlotte and Anne Bronte lying around naked and bored on horsehair settees... sex symbols... you fill in the rest” (*Choke* 212).

Ida set the stage for her clients to fully mediate a sexual experience. The mental trip would be complete simulation; the historical details and the women’s appearances would not even necessarily resemble their original. The fantasy would be totally based in society’s mediation of the “reality” of his chosen sex symbol woman and her time period. Clients simply project this “reality” into the sexual fantasy and live, for a few moments, in a wet dream of pure simulation. The men are not real, the women are not real, the history is not real; reality, in Ida Mancini’s professional life, has disappeared.

Not surprisingly, choking also factors into *Choke*’s world of simulation and mediation. Victor enjoys going to restaurants and pretending to choke so that one of the other patrons can enact a simulated rescue. He makes his face turn purple and sweaty, he involuntarily spasms, he pulls out all the mediated choking signifiers. But, despite appearances to the contrary, Victor is never actually choking. Nor does he simulate choking because he wants rescue. Instead, Victor chokes in order to “put adventure back into people’s lives... create heroes... [and] make money” (*Choke* 49). Choking is

mediated to be an accidental and life-threatening circumstance; it is a condition that needs to be alleviated. Yet, Victor's use of choking inverts all these mediated beliefs, proving that a good simulation can underscore the lack of realness behind any behavior, even something as seemingly involuntary and serious as choking. Victor wants, and, in fact, needs to continue choking. The individuals who "save" him send him checks when he needs money, feeling somehow responsible for his life. It is through this source of income that he is able to afford his mother's hospital care. Without choking, Victor would not be able to survive. The continuation of his life, and his mother's life, depends on perpetual choking, whereas perpetual choking normally signifies death. However, in a world in which meaning and absolute reference is absent, the total reversal of a signifier's signified is not out of the question.

Victor's workplace is still another instance of Baudrillard's theories in action within the text. Victor is employed at a colonial village, a fully working tourist trap that simulates every aspect of a colonial town. Within the village are blacksmiths and cow milkers, butter churners and candlemakers and even a governor; basically, the entire gamut of mediated "colonial" personalities have been recreated. The colonial village workers are severely punished for even the smallest infraction of historical inaccuracy. Chewing gum will mean a day spent in the stocks. Using a tissue to blow your nose can end up in banishment. One village worker believes she has carpal tunnel syndrome and Victor replies that she can't "because it won't be invented until the Industrial Revolution" (*Choke* 234). The village attempts to copy a prototypical colonial town down to its last atom and, further, becomes hyperreal in its exclusion of unseemly colonial characteristics. The colonial village "doesn't have a village whore" or a village idiot or

any pickpockets or even a hangman; as Victor complains, “This is the worst part with living history museums. They always leave the best parts out. Like typhus. And opium. And scarlet letters. Shunning. Witch-burning” (*Choke* 29). The organizers of the village have chosen to sanitize history, to create a more perfect copy than the original. Victor’s colonial village is, therefore, a hyperreal environment where safe, mediated ideas of “colonial” replace sometimes harsh colonial realities. But, of course, just beneath the surface of the village is the emptiness which reveals that everything within the town is a simulation. After all, no matter how much sanitizing or perfecting occurs, “The tourists will all be in the tavern drinking Australian ale out of pewter mugs made in Indonesia” and experiencing an authenticity that is only as deep as their belief in it (*Choke* 33).

The construction of *Choke* clearly owes a debt to Baudrillard. Practically every action, every character’s identity, and every event is steeped in simulation. Palahniuk obviously borrows ideas from Baudrillard and weaves them into a rich, complex plot filled with parody, pastiche, and dark humor. Indeed, *Choke* provides concrete examples of Baudrillardian theories; the otherwise somewhat esoteric concepts of simulation and mediation within society are made more accessible through the text’s grounding of these concepts in seemingly everyday, albeit dysfunctional, events and characters. Palahniuk’s *Choke* is a direct outgrowth of Baudrillardian ideas; it is a text that places itself firmly in a hyperreal world populated by characters simulating and resimulating their identities all while discovering the hollowness of reality.

## CHAPTER IV

### VIOLENCE IS SOMETIMES THE ANSWER: BREAKING AWAY FROM THE SIMULACRA

If Palahniuk's *Choke* was merely an excellent resource for understanding Baudrillardian theory, it would still be a valuable text. As it stands, however, *Choke* expands on the ideas of simulation and mediation and struggles to free itself from the snares of Baudrillard's ultimate unreality. Through a regime of breakdown and disorder, the text fights to emerge from "the end or disappearance of... the real, the social, history, and other key features of modernity" (Best 133). It attempts to create a meaningful correspondence between signifiers and signifieds, between images and meanings. While Baudrillard posits that "everything can and has been done, and all we can do is to assemble the... pieces of our culture and proceed to its extremities," *Choke* resists such reasoning and, in fact, runs through stages of assembly and extremism to demonstrate how utterly futile and pointless they are (Best 137). *Choke* seeks to blow apart those very reproductions that Baudrillard claims cause the implosion of meaning. Essentially, the text advocates a clean sweep of communication, a discarding of all mediated reality. In *Choke*, as in many other Palahniuk novels, the flow of true meaning can only return to society and individuals once all mediated, simulated, reproduced "meanings" are razed.

Thus, the text does glorify destruction, but it is destruction in search of hope, destruction that will, presumably, lead to creation.

Victor's eventual identity collapse, and his subsequent rebuilding, is paradigmatic of *Choke's* anti-Baudrillardian philosophy. Victor begins by compiling the persona of a dysfunctional, perpetually orphaned child-cum-adult from mediated symbols of "dysfunction." His sex addiction and his compulsion to simulate choking in restaurants are symptoms of this poor attempt at constructing a workable identity. When the "traumatized child-now-in-adulthood" simulation fails, Victor turns to new mediated identities: Christ and Antichrist. These personas also lack any depth or connection to Victor's core being and are, subsequently, discarded. As the text progresses, Victor drops all attempts at creating his identity from the palette of society's mass-produced conceptions. He pleads for someone to "just show me one thing in this world that is what you'd think" (*Choke* 205). But, as no inherent realness exists in contemporary society, no one can show Victor a thing or an individual with inherent meaning. Therefore, his only option is to extricate himself from the culture of simulation by cutting himself off from his own history and other individuals' mediated perceptions of his past.

In a moment of clarity, Victor realizes that he must reduce his identity to its simplest, most immediate terms because "There's no way you can get the past right. You can pretend. You can delude yourself, but you can't re-create what's over" (*Choke* 273). Thus, by the end of the novel, Victor is more a blank page than a fully fleshed character. Rather than continuing to allow his identity to be an ever-evolving reactive simulation that forms in reference to external mediation, he becomes a clean slate on which he can write his own self-generated identity. He slakes off most of the factors that traditionally

inform self; familial expectation, personal history, and even conventional emotion are all missing from his identity at the text's close. As Victor explains, "For the first time in longer than I can remember, I feel peaceful. Not happy. Not sad. Not anxious. Not horny. Just all the higher parts of my brain closing up shop.... I'm simplifying myself" (*Choke* 282). The implication is that, in order to escape simulation, Victor must revert to a more primitive state. His thoughts are of an essentially basic order; he no longer seeks out "deeper" meanings or alternate referentials. Instead, events, feelings, people, and things simply are what they appear to be, without connection to external mediation. For Victor, the universe of multiple signified meanings for any given signifier is no longer relevant. He has destroyed his perception of alternate reference and, therefore, has limited his field of meaning to exclusively intrinsic values. Such perception comes at a price, however. Victor has to sacrifice a world of possibility, of variable signification, for concrete meaning. He can no longer ponder whether an image means one thing or another; rather, an image will, to Victor, always be fixed to one referent. In a sense, then, he has given up the parts of his "higher brain," namely a rigorous intellect and boundless creativity, in order to gain a foothold into solid reality and flee Baudrillard's infinite simulatory spiral. Whereas Baudrillard "critiques... representational thought which is confident that it is describing reality as it is," Victor embraces such thoughts with open arms (Best 140). Victor is intelligent enough to understand that choosing a path of self-imposed communicative primitivism is the only measure of prevention against accruing a new body of simulacra.

The polar opposite of Victor is Tracy, the woman to whom he loses his virginity. She is the prime example of an individual forever lost in Baudrillardian post-

structuralism, representing everything that Victor, or any person, may become when nihilistic acceptance of simulation has infiltrated every aspect of self. Victor meets her on an airplane, in an unlocked bathroom. She takes flights, enters the restroom, leaves the door unlocked, then waits until someone walks in on her and attempts to engage them in a sexual encounter. When Victor questions her aberrant behavior, she replies that “the answer is there is no answer... when you think about it, there’s no good reason to do anything. There is no point... people... don’t want an orgasm as much as they just want to forget. Everything.” (*Choke* 256-7). Clearly, life in the Baudrillardian void has taken its toll on this woman. Tracy ponders “Why do I do anything? ...I’m educated enough to talk myself out of any plan. To deconstruct any fantasy. Explain away any goal. I’m so smart I can negate any dream.” (*Choke* 257). She is the essence of Baudrillard’s post-constructionist theory; in her, the text introduces an embodiment of hyper-intellectualism that has cut away all the joy, fulfillment, and meaning from life and reality and, subsequently, sees only a vacuum underlying all existence. Her nihilism leads into a quest for extrication from the ultimate emptiness and, thus, works as the catalyst for her sexual addiction. She wants to find meaning and absolute reality but will always be forced, due to her intelligence and her deconstructive ability, to undermine the very goal she is trying to achieve.

For Tracy, meaning is impossible not because it has objectively disappeared, but because she cannot accept simple truths or non-multiplicitous signifiers. She thrives on the complexity of reality and, therefore, will never be satisfied by a simplistic interpretation, even if the simplistic interpretation is that for which she yearns. Through Tracy’s unsatisfied, perpetually-wandering nature, the text puts forth the implication that



maintaining such an unflinching post-constructionist mindset has no future other than disappointment, dysfunction, and existential despair. Indeed, *Choke* implicitly attacks Baudrillard's blasé acceptance of simulation and attempts to show the ramifications of such acceptance. Hence, while the critical perspective from which Baudrillard's theory stems is akin to a scalpel, cutting deeper and deeper into the body of reality to reveal unending layers of nothingness, *Choke* advocates a return to a bandaged surface; it strives toward the revitalization of easily accessible signifieds, and, thus, shuns Tracy's (see also Baudrillard's) system of thought that only seeks to forever prove the disappearance of meaning. Therefore, the text is ultimately moving beyond Baudrillard by "emphasizing creation over destruction" and promoting the deemphasization of post-constructionist critical inquiry as a means of understanding reality (Kavadlo 12).

To further illustrate the resurrection of meaningful signifiers and images, the text introduces Denny, Victor's best friend. Denny is a recovering sex addict who, throughout the text, earnestly seeks rehabilitation. As sex addictions in *Choke* seem to be symptomatic of a fatalistic surrender to the simulatory world, Denny is the one character who consistently seeks out a means of resistance. Strangely enough, this resistance takes the form of thousands of rocks. As the novel progresses, Denny builds an enormous rock collection and, with those rocks, embarks on the construction of a mystery structure in an empty field. He enlists Victor's help and, when a local reporter comes to interview Victor and Denny about the construction project, Victor's responses are veiled in a haze of ignorance. Victor recalls the dialogue between himself and the reporter, saying that she asked:

“‘This structure you're building, is it a house?’  
And I say we don't know.

‘Is it a church of some kind?’  
We don’t know.  
... ‘What are you building, then?’  
We won’t know until the very last rock is set.  
‘But when will that be?’  
We don’t know.” (*Choke* 263-4).

Victor’s reticence with the reporter is not due to any particular stigma or grudge against the media. Rather, his unforthcoming answers are a result of a new (or perhaps ancient) mode of perception and, thus, communication.

Instead of focusing on the possibilities of the stone structure or its eventual outcome, Denny instructs Victor to focus on the process of building, alone. He says that “the longer we can keep building, the longer we can keep creating, the more will be possible. The longer we can tolerate being incomplete,” the better (*Choke* 264). Initially, this statement appears to echo Baudrillard’s sentiments, with a perpetual process of building that leads nowhere and creation that actually creates nothing. Yet, precisely the opposite is true. By compelling the rock structure to remain a work-in-progress without a definitive end, Denny has squashed any simulacrum nature the building may possess. He and Victor are not putting stones atop one another to create any of the long-mediated structures of society. The stone building is not a house or a church or any other structure of convention and, therefore, is not founded upon any previous referent. Denny’s rock building is not trying to simulate any other structure; it is simply allowed to rise and become whatever it eventually becomes. With the stone structure, Denny is attempting to introduce a product that holds inherent, unmediated meaning. As soon as Denny or Victor would conclude that the building is a house or a church, then it would, necessarily, begin to take on aspects of those structures. It would begin to simulate a house or a church. But, by allowing the structure to grow almost organically, Denny has set the

groundwork for a signifier that may finally be connected with an inherent meaning, with a concrete undeniable reality.

The price for cultivating an unmediated, unsimulatory reality is high, however. Both Denny and Victor must discard the realm of speculation and conjecture. In order to maintain a sense of the real, all possibility outside a thing's readily apparent meaning must vanish. Denny and Victor do not know what the stone building will be because they don't want to know until it is finished. They choose a path of ignorance so that realness may reassert itself within the structure without being crushed by external mediated "reality." Basically, Denny and Victor must become simple, single-minded individuals who have no need for multiplicitous signs and no desire for a constant outgrowth of discourse. Theirs is a reality that requires no mediation, no simulation, and, hence, no emptiness. Such a lifestyle choice flies in the face of our contemporary world, where formulating variable meanings for signifiers and expanding the possible field of referentials for images is second-nature. The very fiber of critical theory, or of practically any academic discipline, hinges on increased speculation, on infinitely sprawling discourses, and on the complication of texts, signifiers, and reality itself. *Choke's* solution for escaping Baudrillard's simulation is to escape that same incisively critical manner of thinking. In doing so, Denny and Victor become primitive post-postmodern men. The duo simultaneously evolve and devolve communication; they usher reality back into a signifier but cause the collapse of complexity. Indeed, "many of the seemingly random transgressive acts perpetrated by the characters in Palahniuk's fiction," such as Denny and Victor's intentional ignorance, "fall within an understanding of entropy as a force for renewal and meaning" (Sartain 32). Thus, while Denny may

have set society on a course for a neo-stone age, his rock structure may actually be something that simply “is what it is.”

Victor’s mother, Ida, is an individual who also manages to cut ties with simulation, but in a much different, and arguably more destructive, manner. Her perspective on reality, like the neo-primitivism of Victor and Denny, strives to attain communion with a long-lost realness. However, Ida takes a much more direct and assertive approach. She uses drugs to “simplify” her state of mind. As Ida explains, “Trichloroethane... All my extensive testing has shown this to be the best treatment for a dangerous excess of human knowledge” (*Choke* 148). She is attempting to clear away the debris of contemporary society’s all-consuming media (and with it mediation and simulation) by chemically altering her consciousness, thus allowing her to ignore its multiplicity of disembodied voices and images that would, otherwise, crush her unmediated, individual perception of reality. Ida claims that she can see things as they truly are when she is on drugs. She says that the trichloroethane makes the world appear “without the framework of language. Without the cage of associations... without looking through the lens of everything she knew was true...” (*Choke* 149). Through her drug-induced highs, Ida is stripping away mediation and, therefore, making simulation impossible. Without a vast body of mediated meanings to draw upon, Ida is forced to view the world as it actually is, in its simplest terms. She has rid herself of simulation and allowed realness to seep back into images. However, the reality is fleeting and dissipates back into the cacophony of Baudrillard’s simulatory universe as soon as Ida is clean once more. Even worse, the constant drug use takes its toll on Ida; over the course of the text, she ends up with a perpetual bloody nose and, ultimately, is reduced to a

feeble, emaciated skeleton. Idea proves that, while escaping Baudrillard's simulation may be possible in a number of ways, the return to reality can come at an indescribably steep price.

Ida is also critical to understanding *Choke's* postulation on the manner in which society may be galvanized into forsaking simulation. It is "Ida's ideology of adventure, her belief in the restorative power of chaos [that] serves to unbalance comfortable homogeneity. She... seeks to create meaning and potential for change through random chaotic acts" (Sartain 33). Ida vandalizes merchandise in stores, kidnaps children, and causes public disturbances all in the service of disrupting complacent adherence to mediated reality. She knows that "a fire alarm is never about a fire, anymore" and tries to disseminate this knowledge across society, albeit obliquely and illegally (*Choke* 161). Ida challenges simulation by creating real panic and real excitement. Her acts of destruction are aimed squarely at bringing a sense of reality back into a populace that, normally, experiences events and emotions in a heavily mediated environment.

Ida causes people to feel true fear, to experience events that are precisely what they appear to be: actual, unsimulated danger. However, there is no proof that Ida's regime of philosophy-based crime alters the perception or behavior of anyone but Victor over the long term. For a brief moment, the victims of Ida's crimes may experience a true, unmediated, unsimulated event, but as soon as the danger has been resolved, the contemporary culture of mass media creeps back in and continues to suffocate with its hollow signifiers. Therefore, Ida's attempts to empower society may be entirely pointless. While her personal freedom from Baudrillard's simulatory world is assured, she cannot force others to choose the same path of informed, intelligible ignorance.

Indeed, Ida's failure to enact social change exhibits the textual implication that release from simulation must begin in the most intensely personal and introspective realms and radiate outward. Perhaps meaning can be reconnected with images, but, as *Choke* demonstrates, such reconnection must be instituted at the individual level long before it can solidify into an absolute reality upon which everyone agrees.

If *Choke's* resolution to the Baudrillardian dilemma seems somewhat perfunctory or abrupt, it would be in keeping with the theoretical concerns of the text. In a simulatory reality, where all information is produced and mediated to individuals at a hyperkinetic speed, it would be logical for a solution or paradigmatic rebellion to arise just as quickly, given that this solution would still, necessarily, have a point of emergence within a system that is unable to slow the production of information, images, and signifiers. Thus, the text's resolution – an idea that works as a competing perception of reality – appears as quickly and as suddenly as any other random image or information structure; the system of mindless, endless generation has unwittingly generated its own demise.

That *Choke* ends without much exploration of its resolution to simulatory reality is also reasonable, given that such an open-ended future is antithetical to the very principle of Baudrillardian nihilism. The text fights despair and a defeated acceptance of missing reality with unabashed romanticism. With the novel ending shortly after the characters have lain in place their newfound adherence to knowing ignorance, the future is uncertain. Anything could happen to reality following the close of the text; a reunion of images and meaning is as possible as the continuation of hollow simulation. Victor and Denny's plan for identity-formation and reality-perception may lead to the eventual destruction of all simulacra or it may be entirely useless. The reader is left in a state of

unknowing, of hope for meaning-filled future. Such a conclusion is impossible in a Baudrillardian scheme of reality. Under Baudrillard's critical eye, the world has reached a point where struggle against the forces of simulation is impossible. In Baudrillardian theory, there is no hope for the retrieval of meaning; rather, the process of simulacra will continue, unabated. In answer to this bleak nihilistic view, *Choke* presents an open space, an ending that is more the beginning of a competing discourse than a summation of all that has come before it. There is no definite success at the end of the text, nor is there assured defeat. The text's concluding indeterminacy, its allowance for hope, separates it from Baudrillard's nihilism and reinforces the supposition that escape from simulation is, in fact, possible.

CHAPTER V  
A BEACON OF HOPE

At first glance, *Choke* is far from being the harbinger of a new cultural order. It is a text that, on the surface, appears to be merely a cautionary tale of dysfunctional behaviorisms and uncertain identities. Yet it is a far more complex work, as its strength lies in its ability to understand and utilize Jean Baudrillard's theories of simulation and, further, to offer a bold post post-constructionist alternative to Baudrillard's simulatory reality. *Choke*, while owing much to Baudrillard and offering a significantly thorough exploration of simulacra within contemporary society, attempts to move beyond empty simulation and endless mediation. As Chuck Palahniuk has quite appropriately commented, the text centers on the "idea of reinventing and creating your self based on your dream, or how you perceive yourself to be, or not to be... *Choke* [is] based on creating yourself out of a purpose, out of something that you stake your life on, that you commit to." (Interview with C.P. Farley).

The text advocates a "simplification" of oneself or of one's perception of images and signifiers in order to reestablish a connection to meaning and realness. Whether such a connection between image and meaning, between signifier and signified, can ever be



bridged is questionable; even within *Choke*, the science of resuscitating hollow images is inexact and difficult, requiring a great deal of sacrifice. Thus, converting *Choke*'s hypothetical solution to living in simulation from a textual setting to the physical world may not be merely impractical, it may be impossible. Culture would be reduced to a new Dark Age, to a time when the expansion of knowledge and conjecture are shunned in favor of an absolute, simplistic meaning. In such a society, a flower would no longer symbolize love or beauty or sexuality or freshness or nature; it would merely be a flower and its inherent reality – that being the fact that it is a biological entity containing a stem, petals, chlorophyll, etc., etc., which is used for sustenance by insects and other lower life forms – is the beginning and the end of what “flower” can mean. A society devoid of associative and mediated meanings, of copied and simulated signifiers, may be as frightening as a society in which reality has disappeared. After all, what is worse: eternally lacking realness or eternally lacking metaphor? For the characters in *Choke*, the answer is obvious: an absolute reality is preferable to any amount of alternate, albeit thought-provoking, unreal meanings.

Certainly, the text superbly diagnoses the pitfalls of living in a Baudrillardian world, but, more intriguingly, it presents a choice of action or inaction, of remaining a slave to simulation or breaking free. Ultimately, it is the construction of choice – to remain ignorant in the face of a glut of mediated knowledge and increasingly complex but empty “meaning” or to embrace the rich tapestry of simulacra – that separates *Choke* from all other works of literature that endeavor to respond to Baudrillard. Indeed, *Choke*, in all its aggressive regressive glory, stands as a rare beacon of hope for a return to reality.

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