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"And What If You Can't Forget It? . . . What If It Stays in Your Head, Repeating Itself . . . ?": Reading Chuck Palahniuk's Horror Trilogy (*Lullaby*, *Diary*, and *Haunted*) for Obsessions and Compulsions

Steve Van-Hagen

Independent Researcher, Birmingham B76, UK; vanhagensteve@gmail.com

Abstract: This essay argues that one of the distinguishing characteristics of Chuck Palahniuk's self-described "Horror Trilogy" of novels, *Lullaby*, *Diary*, and *Haunted*, is their representation of obsessions, compulsions, and obsessive–compulsive disorders. This essay analyses these representations from a variety of different perspectives, including medical and psychiatric approaches, clinical and self-help narratives, and biocultural readings emanating from cultural history and critical disability studies. It is demonstrated that the novels reflect a range of the debates that arise from these competing approaches, and the points of similarity and difference in the readings produced are identified. Palahniuk's representations, it is suggested, must be seen in the contexts of a number of his recurrent thematic preoccupations, and of his engagement with existential comedy. Ultimately, this essay suggests that Palahniuk's representations of obsessions, compulsions, and OCD must be seen as multi-faceted and protean, as befitting the awareness of the complicated current debates about their conceptualisation that the novels display.

Keywords: Palahniuk; obsessions; compulsions; obsessive–compulsive disorders; horror; existential comedy; transgression; critical disability studies; bioculturalism; psychiatry

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1. Introduction

Jean Baudrillard's *America* (Baudrillard 1988, p. 40) and Lennard J. Davis' *Obsession: A History* (Davis 2008, p. 5) have very different aims and foci, although both stress that obsessionality is central to being both American and (post)modern (Baudrillard contends that America's primary obsession is the fear of losing its modernity). Today, to be obsessive–compulsive is inextricably linked with the diagnosis of obsessive–compulsive disorder (hereafter OCD), a mental-health disorder that is listed and described in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5* (American Psychiatric Association 2013, pp. 237–42; hereafter *DSM-5*) and by the *Yale–Brown Obsessive–Compulsive Scale (Y-BOCS)*. The present-day ubiquity of OCD in medical, psychiatric, and cultural discourses could make one imagine that it was always so. The genealogy of obsession provided by Davis' seminal study suggests otherwise, locating its rise "to greater public attention" to the 1990s (Davis 2008, p. 5), the decade in which the first published works appeared of the prolific novelist (and short-story writer and journalist) of transgression, Chuck Palahniuk. As Davis notes, from this point onwards, "a cavalcade" of books about OCD appeared, some medical and/or psychiatric in nature, but others of the personal memoir and/or "self-help" variety, explaining the nature of the condition, and its (increasingly common) treatment with medication. At the same time, as befitting the condition's entry into wider popular culture, "More and more characters in television shows and film [became] people with OCD" (ibid.), as they did in dramas, novels, and short stories. One OCD memoir, Rose Bretécher's *Pure* (Bretécher 2016), was adapted for television in the UK. The first academic studies of cultural representations of obsessionality, compulsivity and OCD itself appeared—works

of what we might broadly call, in the absence of any other agreed terminology, "cultural obsessionality studies". Such publications examined cultural works that emerged in the 1990s, but also read OCD back into works from earlier periods, such as Karen F. Jacobson's *Obsessive Compulsive Disorder in Moby-Dick, L'Assommoir, and Buddenbrooks* (Jacobson 2005), which also provided an extensive medical–historical overview of OCD as it was then understood. The present essay therefore represents a further entry in this developing critical canon.

Davis' study is a cultural history that exhibits the influence of the critical disability studies which Davis has done much to develop and disseminate. He argues that before the eighteenth century, the symptoms of what today we would call "obsession" were regarded as caused by demon possession (Davis 2008, pp. 31–33); during the mid-eighteenth century, he contends, obsession became increasingly medicalized, seen both as a disease and itself a proper object of obsessive study. Following this historical turning point, *Obsession: A History*'s interest is in how some obsessions came to be seen as problematic, and in need of psychiatric treatment, whereas others—obsessive devotion to one's work, to artistic endeavours, or to amorous affairs—become praiseworthy. Reflecting the social model of disability, according to which social, cultural, and environmental factors shape disability, Davis argues that "No disease exists outside its cultural context" (Davis 2008, p. 12). His approach is "biocultural" and aims "to redeploy culture into the sciences and medicine so that a new synergy and wholeness can illuminate these complex projects" (ibid.). Davis' emphasis upon integration with positivist approaches is important—proposing that cultural history, psychiatry, and neuroscience all have important contributions to make to holistic understandings of obsessionality, compulsivity, and OCD. Davis is clearly aware of the hostility his approach may attract from the medical professions, wants to anticipate it, and responds to objections that he is attempting to diminish the role that the medical professions should play, stressing that bioculturalism seeks to complement neurological and psychiatric perspectives rather than to replace them (e.g., Davis 2008, pp. 19–29). Something of this tension between neuroscientific and psychiatric approaches to obsessionality, and cultural–historical approaches, is perceivable in Palahniuk's writing—or, at the least, he appears aware that each tradition contributes to how we think about the subjects. Such awareness is arguably responsible for some of the ambivalences and complexities that are apparent in Palahniuk's representations of obsessionality.

Several of Palahniuk's novels depict both physical and mental health disorders, the most obvious and most-discussed example being the protagonist's dissociative personality disorder (DPD) in *Fight Club* (even if some critical discussions of the narrator's condition in *Fight Club* fail to identify and name it correctly). Palahniuk has long talked in interviews of the dictionaries of medicine and surgery that populate his bookshelves and that he uses for research. Despite this, there has been little critical discussion of representations of obsessions and compulsions (whether as experienced strictly in OCD or as understood by popular culture) within Palahniuk's wider oeuvre, despite the centrality of one or the other to the plots of several novels (e.g., *Choke*). My central contention is that obsessionality and compulsivity, and current medical and cultural debates about them, are major preoccupations of Palahniuk's self-described "Horror Trilogy" (*Lullaby: A Novel* [2002]; *Diary: A Novel* [2003]; *Haunted: A Novel of Stories* [2006]), in which these topics are explored more thoroughly than elsewhere in his extant work. Throughout the Trilogy there are depictions of obsessions and compulsions as they might be recognised in the *DSM-5*, and also in some of the wider cultural contexts that Davis illustrates (some of which, as Davis acknowledges, psychiatrists or neurologists would object to as unconnected to OCD as the disease they recognise). Major themes of the Trilogy include how we should define, understand, accept, or contest these concepts. The experience of obsessions and compulsions is pervasive and inescapable in these novels, in which questions of how (in no particular order) to survive, endure, celebrate, utilise, bemoan, provoke, or resist obsessions and compulsions are never far away.

Josh Grant-Young (2022) has recently performed a valuable critical service by moving attention away from the satire *Lullaby* directs towards contemporary American society. Instead, he explores the novel, which, as Palahniuk has explained many times, was written after his father's murder in 1999, as a powerful story of loss and mourning, using narratives of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), accounting for its stress on repetition as engagement with the device of the Gothic Loop. In doing so, he seeks to move beyond reading the novel as social critique. The synergies between his approach and my own should become apparent in the next section, which is focused on *Lullaby*. Nonetheless, a focus on Palahniuk's representations of obsessionality and compulsivity is far from incompatible with recognition of the three novels' satire and social critique. My arguments will also rest on showing how Palahniuk implicates his representations of obsessions and compulsions in his wider characteristic musings on existential and postmodern philosophy (which have been much discussed in existing Palahniuk criticism), including the social critique that they enable, and in various self-referential questions about the genre(s) he is utilising. Jesse Kavadlo, writing only about Palahniuk's first two published novels *Fight Club* and *Survivor*, has pointed out that Palahniuk's narrators in these novels "rebel against what the books position as the emasculating conformity of contemporary America" (Kavadlo 2005, p. 5). The word "emasculating" seems inappropriate in the context of the three novels under consideration here—by which time Palahniuk had begun engaging more with the nature of female experiences, which would culminate in later novels being told by first-person female narrators. The struggle in the Trilogy with how to respond to obsessionality, compulsivity, and OCD affects both men and women and—even if there are moments (especially in *Haunted*) in which experiences of obsessionality and compulsivity might appear gendered—therefore represents a largely *human* challenge. But if one were to replace Kavadlo's use of "emasculating" with "dehumanising", the assertion would not otherwise be unapt. Another struggle depicted in the novels is between a trivial and ephemeral contemporary media culture of constant flux, and a populace, both male and female, that this culture serves to distract from key political and existential questions. The obsessionality depicted in *Lullaby*, for all the pain it causes, has the potential to enable this populace to (re)connect with these profound questions—and the question of how to relate to the inescapability of obsessionality and compulsivity emerges as profoundly existential. Facing up to this reality represents a fundamental rebellion against the dominant culture. There may be, of course, readers for whom Palahniuk's decision not to focus more on exploring intersectional experiences of obsessionality and compulsivity—how these experiences are shaped by gender, class, or race—seems significant in itself. Nonetheless, I prefer to concentrate on what Palahniuk does, rather than on what he chooses not to do. The fundamental distinction in these novels is between those characters who experience obsessionality and compulsivity and want to interrogate those experiences, and those who do not.

As Robert Bennett has argued, Palahniuk writes within "what can loosely be described as an existentialist tradition . . . with certain postmodern differences" (Bennett 2005, p. 68). Palahniuk depicts individuals who are trapped, condemned to obsessive and ruminative thought about matters of human agency and life and death in a society otherwise preoccupied with the transient, ephemeral, and trivial; yet they can still choose to affirm, rather than despair of, their lives. Both Palahniuk himself and critics writing about his work have often observed that his fiction is concerned with such individuals who want to connect with others. One of the consequences of this dual fascination with the existential and the postmodern is that Palahniuk's texts enter into a complicated dialectic with Baudrillard's works and major ideas, and particularly the latter's concepts of simulacra, or "hyper-reality" (Baudrillard 1983a, 1983b). Palahniuk's characters often express sentiments such as Ida Mancini's in the earlier novel *Choke*: "'We don't live in the real world anymore,' she said. 'We live in a world of symbols'" (Palahniuk 2001, p. 151). Kavadlo argues that the relationship between Baudrillard's simulacra and Palahniuk's fiction is that Palahniuk's

> characters' frequent celebrations and glorifications of masculinity, sex, individuality, and mayhem attempt to forge something palpable and real in a world where everything is a "copy of a copy of a copy" (*Fight Club* 21) or "the signifier outlasts the signified" (*Survivor* 88), a world of surreal simulacrum. (Kavadlo 2005, p. 7)

In *Lullaby*, the faux obsessionality of contemporary American mass-media society masks the absence of a real or (in existential terms) authentic obsessionality that offers the hope of transgression and independent thought. This more authentic obsessionality is painful, but it is also *hopeful*: those affected become, potentially, amongst the most effective agents of resistance to this mass-media culture of distraction. Hence, in *Lullaby*, there is at least the possibility of escaping, or transcending, the Plato's Cave of symbols and copies that comprises contemporary America (Palahniuk alludes to Plato's Cave directly in *Diary*, and more indirectly in *Haunted*). Unsurprisingly, given that *Lullaby* identifies obsessionality with rebellion and transgressive thought, obsessionality is also associated with a compensatory imagination, and therefore constructed (as in Palahniuk's other novels) as a potentially creative and *artistic* trait, something *Diary* and *Haunted* explore further. Scientists, cultural historians, and theorists who study OCD have all been interested in the relationship between obsessionality, compulsivity, and imagination. Palahniuk's fictions illustrate these debates, albeit within the context of their other recurrent preoccupations. Obsessives, his works suggest, necessarily possess the imagination to terrify themselves (however involuntarily) with their fears; but the imagination to conceive of the world as other than it is represents an essential prerequisite for transgressional thought and action, and this can be one of their compensations. *Diary* and *Haunted*, however, depict the relationship between obsessionality and artistic capacity very differently. *Diary*, read in isolation, could be accused of using obsessionality to perpetuate the myth that suffering endows the sufferer with artistic ability. *Haunted*, by contrast, portrays a motley crew of protagonists who display obsessive and compulsive behaviours and certainly possess, for good or ill, the imagination to conceive of the world as other than it is, all while displaying few artistic abilities at all, much to their own frustration.

2. *Lullaby* and Primarily Obsessional OCD

OCD is defined both by repetitive intrusive thoughts/impulses that an individual is powerless to prevent, and by compulsions, which may be either physical or mental (or some combination of both) that they perform in a vain attempt to reduce the anxiety and discomfort that they experience (see, e.g., Veale and Willson 2021, p. 3; Davis 2008, pp. 7–9). The presence of both of these components in OCD is responsible for the disapprobation from psychiatric professionals towards a contemporary culture in which people might boast that they are "a bit OCD", simply because they are meticulous or thorough (see Davis 2008, pp. 6–7). This controversy about different definitions of OCD used by psychiatric professionals on the one hand, and in common parlance on the other, arguably makes Davis' point that after the mid-eighteenth century the reception of obsessionality bifurcates between being seen either as a serious illness, in some contexts, that requires treatment, or as a desirable character trait in others. Yet, for the psychiatrist and neuroscientist, OCD is an illness that causes devastating anxiety and discomfort (see Veale and Willson 2021, pp. 21, 42–50), and the term should not be (mis)applied in other contexts.

Amidst the repetitions central to the experience of OCD, those affected "may sometimes experience intrusive . . . words or music" (Veale and Willson 2011, p. xiv) in their minds, even when not otherwise related to their obsessions or mental compulsions. Novels are also built around patterns of repetition and variation, as is, therefore, the experience of reading. The success of a piece of writing often depends on its reader recognising that they are re-reading something previously encountered. The repetitions of obsessionality, on this basis, are written into the very lines of Palahniuk's narratives, at the level of the sentence, fragment, and/or aphorism. In his essay collection *Non-Fiction [True Stories]* (previously published in the United States as *Stranger Than Fiction: True Stories*) there is an essay called "Not Chasing Amy" (first published years before in *L.A. Weekly* under

an alternative title). This essay is a part-homage to Palahniuk's mentor in minimalist (or "dangerous") writing, Tom Spanbauer, and the work of Amy Hempel, which Spanbauer teaches to his students. It is also an under-the-bonnet illustration of Palahniuk's application of techniques learned from Spanbauer and Hempel in his own work. The first technique he illustrates is called "horses":

> The metaphor is, if you drive a wagon from Utah to California, you use the same horses the whole way. Substitute the word "themes" or "choruses" and you get the idea. In minimalism, a story is a symphony, building and building, but never losing the original melody line. (Palahniuk 2005, p. 143)

Any reader of Palahniuk's work will have recognised individual words, phrases, or sentences that recur through the narrative, his "horses", "choruses", or "melody lines" (in *Lullaby* these include, amongst others, "sticks and stones may break my bones"; "the details are . . ."; and "the same old power grab"). Like the obsessive, therefore, readers of Palahniuk's fiction, whether they are disturbed by them or not, encounter the same words and aphorisms repeatedly. In *Lullaby*, the plot is driven by just such a recurrent chain of words and phrases, and the inability of the protagonists to stop these lines appearing involuntarily in their mind—a sequence, amidst the novel's recurrent "choruses", that the reader never actually becomes privy to.

Palahniuk's interviews before *Lullaby*'s publication announced it as a generic departure from his previous works of "transgressional fiction", instead proclaiming the book as the first of a trilogy of horror novels, also discussing *Lullaby* as a comedy and even as a romance (Dunn 2002). Interviewers also described it as speculative fiction (Sartain 2006), while Vintage Books' own blurb about *Lullaby* at the end of their editions of Palahniuk's other novels describes *Lullaby* as "a comedy/drama/tragedy. In that order". Palahniuk's claims that one could not write transgressional fiction in the wake of the September 11 (2001) attacks—"People don't see *The Monkey Wrench Gang* in the same light that they saw it before 9/11" (Dunn 2002)—have proven to be a red herring. Numerous critics have demonstrated that Palahniuk has continued to write transgressional fiction post 9/11, including David McCracken, who has devoted a monograph to the subject of how Palahniuk uses the comic grotesque mode precisely for reasons of representing subversion (McCracken 2020). McCracken's book draws examples solely from novels written after the Al-Qaeda attacks. Nonetheless, otherwise, the generic claims made for the novel summarised above give some idea of its multivalent nature, and its description as both comedy and tragedy seems particularly appropriate in light of its existential preoccupations.

The "Lullaby" of the novel's title is a "culling song", a rhyme that literally kills anyone to whom it is addressed, or even whom a protagonist is thinking of at the time it runs through their mind. The main protagonist, Carl Streator, is a reporter researching a story about sudden infant death syndrome (or "crib death") who discovers that each young victim was read the rhyme from a book titled *Poems and Rhymes from Around the World* before their death. Realising that he killed his own wife and child years before in this way, Streator embarks upon a desperate, and largely unsuccessful, attempt to avoid killing others as the rhyme involuntarily intrudes into his mind. "Hitting me as fast as a chill, chilling me all down my back, the culling song spins through my head, and the body count grows" (Palahniuk 2002, p. 90), he observes, as another victim expires. Streator sets out on a road trip across the nation, determined to destroy copies of the book containing the rhyme, aided by his accomplice, Helen Hoover Boyle—who also discovered the rhyme's potent threat through painful personal experience.

Upon *Lullaby*'s publication, Palahniuk talked about the novel as a battle for power and domination, set against the backdrop of a variety of "invasive" media (Dunn 2002), the closest he came to discussing the intrusive thoughts and images under analysis here. The variant of OCD that is evoked most by what the protagonists of the novel experience is now widely known as "primarily obsessional" OCD. That we now talk about such a variant at all is a result of the development in understanding of obsessional disorders, as a subset of anxiety disorders, since Freud's early work on the subject (see Freud [1895]

1948a, pp. 107–27, [1895] 1948b, pp. 128–37, [1894] 1948c, pp. 76–106, 1963). While many later accounts are available (see, for instance, Kraepelin 1907, 1962; Salzman 1968; Marks 1978; Tallis 1992, 1995; Jacobson 2005, pp. 11–84, 316–18; Veale and Willson 2021), most until recently would include a variant once commonly known as "pure obsessionality" or, more informally, "pure-O" (and some accounts still use these terms, including the title of Rose Bretécher's (Bretécher 2016)). This was thought to be a variant that was especially challenging to treat because, while those who suffered from it experienced intrusive thoughts or impulses, they did not experience the urge to perform compulsions to reduce the resulting anxiety. Over time, this view has been challenged because those who experience this variant perform mental rituals instead of physical ones to reduce their anxiety (Veale and Willson 2021, pp. 50–52). Critics of the term have stressed that there is no OCD variant in which those afflicted do not perform compulsions to reduce their anxiety, and hence some have adopted the alternative term of "primarily obsessional" OCD.

The fictional world in which Palahniuk's Horror Trilogy is set is one that transcends the laws of the physical world, and hence Sartain's description of *Lullaby* as a work of "speculative fiction" (Sartain 2006). The culling song in *Lullaby* functions as a signifier for the death of whoever the protagonists are simultaneously directing their attention towards. Hence, within horror's history as a literary genre, the Trilogy meets Ann Radcliffe's well-known definition (Radcliffe 1826) of "horror" gothic as that in which the supernatural fears of its protagonists really come to pass, as opposed to its inverse, "terror" gothic, in which supernatural fears prove to be the result of overactive imaginations. While there has been scepticism about the reliability of estimates of the proportion of the general population who suffer from OCD, especially in recent decades as reported cases have skyrocketed (see Davis 2008, pp. 209–10, 220–22), of those who do, it has been claimed that only about one in twenty suffer from this primarily obsessional variant (Veale and Willson 2011, p. xiv). Thoughts of harming others—a subset of so-called "Harm OCD"—are some of the most common intrusive thoughts experienced by those with the primarily obsessional variant. In order to perceive why this is such a horror-come-true for those affected, it is necessary to understand a bit more about their psychological profile. Contra Freud, who hypothesized that intrusive obsessional thoughts and impulses were repressed wishes, a more modern view posits: "The truth of OCD is that it reflects your deepest fears, not your darkest wishes" (Veale and Willson 2021, p. 77). The involuntary thoughts that those with the primarily obsessional variant experience are said to be "ego-dystonic" (Davis 2008, p. 217), or opposed to their moral values, which is what so disturbs them. They attach a degree of (over-)importance to the thoughts that is not warranted (technically speaking, they present with "over-valued ideation"), and are tormented by "thought-action fusion" (see Jacobson 2005, p. 64), the belief that thinking something (however involuntarily) and doing it are the same. Usually, the individuals affected are of a particularly responsible disposition, and have firmly established, even rigid, ideas of right and wrong. This prompts Frank Tallis to call them "the people least likely to do harm to others", and to find it "ironic" that they "are those who worry most about doing harm when they have a distressing thought" (Tallis 1992, p. 28). Veale and Willson go further, asserting that "there are no recorded cases of a person with OCD carrying out their obsession. This is similar to the way a person who is *fearful* of jumping off bridges is not going to jump off a bridge" (Veale and Willson 2021, p. 31). They continue that

> people with OCD form one of the safest groups of people in the world . . . individuals with OCD are trying too hard to stop themselves from harming others. So confident are we about this that we would happily ask a person with OCD to babysit our children and to test out their fears by concentrating very hard on having thoughts about killing them. We know they will not. (ibid., pp. 42–43)

Read in the light of current knowledge of OCD, *Lullaby* presents nothing less than a fictionalisation of the most dreaded fears of those who suffer from its primarily obsessional variant. These fears intrude into their consciousness against their will sometimes for many hours each day (in what are known as "ruminations"), and they perform elaborate mental

or physical rituals to ward off these thoughts, aware of the futile irrationality of what they are doing, yet often powerless to stop. Within these terms, the narrative of *Lullaby* is horrific indeed.

Palahniuk loses few opportunities in *Lullaby* to emphasise that his protagonist, Streator, as a journalist, has a(n) (near-)obsessive attention to detail. As devotion to accuracy is something desirable in an ideal journalist, this serves as an illustration of Davis' key point that (post)modern American society has constructed both positive and problematic obsessionalities. Streator tells the reader, "My job is to notice the details. To be an impartial witness. Everything is always research" (Palahniuk 2002, p. 255). If he does not note everything in sufficient detail, his story will be rejected:

> Their baby has choked to death on an ornament. You get what you need, the baby's name and age and all, and you get back to the newspaper around midnight and write the story on press deadline.
>
> You submit it to your editor and he rejects it because you don't say the color of the ornament. Was it red or green? You couldn't look and you didn't think to ask. (Palahniuk 2002, p. 11)

This is how "The details about *x* are . . .", Streator's characteristic way of introducing description (usually about other characters), becomes one of the novel's various "choruses" or "melody lines" (see, for further examples, Palahniuk 2002, pp. 13, 25, 149). Streator was not, the reader imagines, always this way. While the extent to which he may have been obsessional as a younger man is unstated, this obsessionality has not developed simply as an aid to his career. Blaming himself for not noticing that his wife and child were dead, however—obsessive disorders are often exacerbated by emotional upheaval or trauma—he has learned to overcompensate for his laxity that morning years before by exhibiting meticulousness forever afterwards. He displays, in other words, a classic obsessive–compulsive behaviour of seeking to contrive order to make up for the chaotic lack of control he feels, for his inability to bring back his wife and child, or forget his feelings of guilt and responsibility for their deaths:

> The truth is, even if you read to your wife and child some night. You read them a lullaby. And the next morning, you wake up but your family doesn't. You lie in bed, still curled against your wife. She's still warm but not breathing. Your daughter's not crying. The house is already hectic with traffic and talk radio and steam pounding through the pipes inside the wall. The truth is, you can forget even that day for the moment it takes to make a perfect knot in your tie.
>
> This I know. This is my life.
>
> You might move away, but that's not enough. You'll take up a hobby. You'll bury yourself in work. Change your name. You'll cobble things together. Make order out of chaos . . . Organize every detail. (Palahniuk 2002, p. 20)

By "burying" himself in work by taking up D.I.Y. as a hobby, Streator hoped, for a time, to forget the past. Not succeeding, he comes to feel that the blare and noise of the mass media (what, after Orwell, he calls Big Brother) makes people forget or ignore what is inconvenient and conform to societal norms. (This is possibly in a nod, on Palahniuk's part, to the philosopher Louis Althusser's concept of the ideological state apparatus, a favourite idea to which he has referred in numerous interviews). In the effort to keep occupied, and in pursuit of perfection, he "tweezer[s] together the tiny bits of each chimney and let[s] the glue dry" while building the roof (ibid.). He recounts all of the domestic jobs that he does in great detail to use up the time until "With everything perfect, exact, meticulous, it must be three or four in the morning, because by now it's quiet . . . The trick to forgetting the big picture is to look at everything close-up" (2020, p. 21). As Grant-Young (Grant-Young 2022) would point out, this is part of the process of coming to terms with the trauma and the post-traumatic stress disorder caused by grief. For whatever reason, though, whether by choice or compulsion by forces beyond his control, Streator lapses increasingly into obsessional

behaviour. Numerous accounts exist of the neurological and neurobiological explanations for obsessional disorders (see, for a summary, Veale and Willson 2021, pp. 80–82, 88–91; Davis 2008, pp. 209–31), and these are necessarily subject to revision as new research is undertaken. Nobody, however, has yet been able to explain neurologically why obsessional disorders strike individuals when they do, or why their condition worsens so much when they experience a deeply traumatic event such as bereavement.

Streator's accounts of his attempt to occupy his mind with something (anything) else when he was in the midst of grief for his wife and daughter foreshadow his (and Helen's) later attempts to avoid thinking of the culling song. This creates a fictional enactment of the classic conundrum experienced by those afflicted with primarily obsessional OCD, seeking relief from disturbing intrusive thoughts: how does one avoid thinking of something without calling that thing to mind? Hence, they engage in compulsive mental rituals that are known, within the lexicon of OCD, as either "thought blocking" or "thought switching" (Freud's term had been "substituting"). The results for Streator and Helen are as predictably unsuccessful as in real-life OCD narratives, albeit with the tragicomic consequences that ensue from the fictional scenario Palahniuk has contrived. When Streator cannot fend off the "spike" or "trigger" represented by the culling song, it causes the death of others:

> Before that, walking from the bar on Third, back to work, I counted my steps. *To keep my mind busy, I counted 276 steps* until a guy wearing a black leather trench coat shoves past me at a street corner, saying, "Wake up, asshole. The sign says, 'Walk'."
>
> Hitting me as sudden as a yawn, me glaring at the guy's black leather back, the culling song loops through my head.
>
> Still crossing the street, the guy in the trench coat lifts his foot to step over the far curb, but doesn't clear it. His toe kicks into the curb halfway up, and he pitches forward onto the sidewalk, flat on his forehead. It's the sound of dropping an egg on the kitchen floor, only a really big, big egg full of blood and brains. His arms lie straight down at his sides. The toes of his black wing tips hang off the curb a little, over the gutter.
>
> *I step past him, counting 277, counting 278, counting 279* . . . (Palahniuk 2002, p. 68, my italics)

Having failed to save lives by occupying his mind with counting, in the passage that follows, Streator goes on to commit the involuntary homicide of several other people, including a policeman, a woman with a walkie-talkie, and another man who gazes out at him as the door of his elevator closes (Palahniuk 2002, pp. 68–69). There are many more examples of counting rituals as an attempted means of thought blocking/switching in the novel (see Palahniuk 2002, pp. 76, 99–103, 119, 137, 205, 209, 240). Streator's accomplice and eventual love interest, Helen Hoover Boyle, by contrast evolves a novel means of ensuring that she does not accidentally kill loved ones when the culling song enters her mind, by working as a contract killer for hire:

> "The key is to kill people deliberately," Helen says, and picks up the picture of Gustave Brennan in the newspaper. Looking at it up close, she says, "You kill strangers deliberately so you don't accidentally kill the people you love." (Palahniuk 2002, p. 148)

This actualisation of thought–action fusion allows for Streator to achieve certain insights both about his own relationship to wider society, and about the place of obsessionality within this relationship, that could not be accomplished otherwise. Those with primarily obsessional OCD are ultimately obsessed with the act of thought itself (which is why those with intrusive thoughts of harming others do not act upon them), and this capacity—necessity—for intense reflection contrasts starkly with a wider society afflicted by a kind of collective attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. *Lullaby* depicts a society perpetually alert to threats and risks that are either illusory or magnified out of all proportion.

This is a culture receptive to the repeated hoax ads placed by the eco-terrorist-anarchist Oyster (Streator's "son" in the faux family of four that take to the road to find and destroy copies of *Poems and Rhymes from Around the World*). These ads invite the public to contact non-existent law firms to become involved in class-action lawsuits on ever more preposterous grounds:

> **Attention Patrons of All Plush Interiors**
>
> **Furniture Stores**
>
> If poisonous spiders have hatched from your new upholstered furniture, you may be eligible to take part in a class-action lawsuit. (Palahniuk 2002, p. 9)
>
> **Attention Patrons of the Treeline Dining Club**
>
> Have you contracted a treatment-resistant form of chronic fatigue syndrome after eating in this establishment? Has this food-borne virus left you unable to work and live a normal life? If so, please call the following number to be part of a class-action lawsuit. (Palahniuk 2002, pp. 24–25)

Similar notices appear throughout the novel (see, for instance, Palahniuk 2002, pp. 41, 67, 100, 140, 141, 159) until "patrons of the Helen Boyle Real Estate Agency" are asked whether they have been sold a haunted house (Palahniuk 2002, p. 197). It is the contrast, therefore, between the danger posed by the culling song and this proliferation of illusory or exaggerated risk that prompts Streator to characterise contemporary America as " . . . not real . . . just a movie . . . the culture that cried wolf" (Palahniuk 2002, p. 94), a culture so used to counterfeit risks that it will not know how to deal with the real thing.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that Palahniuk depicts contemporary American society as preoccupied with the need to make safe, to avoid risk, real or imagined (though usually the latter), a recurring theme of his novels. As Ida Mancini in *Choke* used to tell her son Victor,

> People had been working for so many years to make the world a safe, organized place. Nobody realized how boring it would become . . . Nobody had left much room for adventure, except maybe the kind you could buy. On a roller coaster. At a movie. Still, it would always be that kind of faux excitement. You know the dinosaurs aren't going to eat the kids. The test audiences have outvoted any chance of even a major faux disaster. And because there's no possibility of real disaster, real risk, we're left with no chance for real salvation. Real elation. Real excitement. Joy. Discovery. Invention.
>
> The laws that keep us safe, these same laws condemn us to boredom.
>
> Without access to true chaos, we'll never have true peace.
>
> Unless everything can get worse, it won't get any better. (Palahniuk 2001, p. 159)

Ida and Victor are not to be taken at face value any more than any of Palahniuk's other unreliable narrators or protagonists (a group of which Streator, arguably the first sympathetic narrator of Palahniuk's novels, is not a member); but this is not to say that they do not have moments of insight, and their depictions of society have plenty in common with those of the reliable Streator. Firstly, the above passage is illustrative of the claim quoted earlier that Palahniuk's characters strive to forge something palpable and real in a world of copies and symbols. The intimations of hyper-reality are overt, and Ida's reference to the movie echoes Streator's, quoted previously (Palahniuk 2002, p. 94). Secondly, however, the passage suggests that people within this society know that these "risks" are largely illusory; any possible "disaster" would be "faux", and people would know it. It may appear that a society afflicted by repetitive neurotic worries has a claim to suffering from some sort of collective obsessive disorder (which is exactly the claim Baudrillard makes in *America*). This assertion emerges as being in need of qualification, however. This society is not suffering from any mass-societal OCD at all. Rather than intimating that this society is *too* obsessive, Palahniuk's fiction might plausibly be seen as suggesting that in

some respects it is not nearly obsessive *enough*. The OCD sufferer experiences an intense anxiety, a quickening of the heart rate and adrenaline rush (however unpleasant it may be) that this decadent, black-and-white, thirty-watt society has long forsaken. In comparison with that of the true obsessional, any claim made for the "obsessionality" of contemporary America itself emerges as a sham, another of the pale imitations and simulacra that fascinate Palahniuk. Unlike the obsessional, who cannot do otherwise but concentrate intensely on the object of her/his ruminations, a cacophony of noise and multimedia blocks out society's illusory anxieties. Not only is one faux anxiety quickly replaced with another before any great rumination or reflection can take place, but the outside noise stifles and suppresses sustained thought. In the consequences of this cacophony lies a great threat to the members of Western societies, and to the place and agency of the individual within them:

> No one wants to admit we're addicted to music. That's just not possible. No one's addicted to music and television and radio. We just need more of it, more channels, a larger screen, more volume. We can't bear to be without it, but no, nobody's addicted.
>
> We could turn it off any time we wanted . . .
>
> Old George Orwell got it backward.
>
> Big Brother isn't watching. He's singing and dancing. He's pulling rabbits out of a hat. Big Brother's busy holding your attention every moment you're awake. He's making sure you're always distracted. He's making sure you're fully absorbed.
>
> He's making sure your imagination withers . . . He's making sure your attention is always filled.
>
> And this being fed, it's worse than being watched. With the world always filling you, no one has to worry about what's in your mind. With everyone's imagination atrophied, no one will ever be a threat to the world . . . (Palahniuk 2002, pp. 18–19)

Hence a vision is advanced of a post/modern mass media that plays a role akin to that ascribed to it by Althusser as an ideological state apparatus (see Althusser [1970] 1994, pp. 100–40), albeit with one notable variation. It is Streator's diagnosis that the media does not "interpellate" the subject into any particular view, but rather that it prevents her/him from forming any view at all. The comparison with obsessionality is clear—the cacophony of media noise might accurately be described as "invasive" (to use Palahniuk's word), as might the intrusive thoughts experienced by obsessionals. Yet here the comparison ends. The thoughts of the latter prompt agonised soul-searching, rationalising, and contemplation of life's profound questions (however fruitless this might be, and however anguished); the function of the former, Streator alleges, is to occupy the mind in order to inhibit and prevent meaningful thought.

In Palahniuk's fictional world, for salvation to be possible, the risk has to be real, as in *Choke*. Victor muses, "It seemed that moment would last forever. That you had to risk your life to get love. You had to get right to the edge of death ever to be saved" (Palahniuk 2001, p. 3) and, at the novel's conclusion, "They saved me. I almost died" (Palahniuk 2001, p. 287). The degree to which salvation is possible is in inverse proportion to the degree of risk to which one is exposed, something known instinctively by Ida Mancini, but that the cautious, obsessional Streator learns slowly through experience. Hence, in *Lullaby*, not only is the agony of the obsessive real, but her/his worst nightmares, usually by definition groundless, come to pass, and every thought of causing harm to others—or every thought that effectively signifies harm to others—is actually realised. This is a variant of OCD even purer than what was once called "pure obsessionality". The consequences of the culling song becoming common knowledge *would* be terrible:

> The culling song would be a plague unique to the Information Age. Imagine a world where people shun the television, the radio, movies, the Internet,

> magazines and newspapers. People have to wear earplugs the way they wear condoms and rubber gloves. In the past, nobody worried too much about sex with strangers. Or before that, bites from fleas. Or untreated drinking water. Mosquitoes. Asbestos.
>
> Imagine a plague you can catch through your ears.
>
> Sticks and stones will break your bones, but now words can kill, too. (Palahniuk 2002, p. 41)

Streator envisages the whole of society engaging in mass rituals and compulsions in order to try and prevent the thought of the culling song:

> Imagine people chanting prayers, singing hymns, to drown out any sound that might bring death. Their hands clamped over their ears, imagine people shunning any song or speech where death could be coded the way maniacs would poison a bottle of aspirin. (Palahniuk 2002, p. 42)

In spite of these terrible consequences, or rather because of them, public discovery of the truth about the culling song would produce redeeming consolations:

> In a world where the culling song was common knowledge, there would be sound blackouts. Like during wartime, wardens would patrol. But instead of hunting for light, they'd listen for noise and tell people to shut up . . .
>
> It would be a dangerous, frightened world, but at least you could sleep with your windows open. It would be a world where each word was worth a thousand pictures.
>
> It's hard to say if that world would be any worse than this, the pounding music, the roar of television, the squawk of radio.
>
> Maybe without Big Brother filling us, people could think.
>
> The upside is maybe our minds would become our own. (Palahniuk 2002, p. 60)

In trying to destroy copies of *Poems and Rhymes from Around the World*, Streator and Helen attempt to save society from a real risk; they also discover that the grimoire of spells from which the culling song originates contains spells to help *save* people: "And maybe, if you can kill someone, maybe you can bring them back" (Palahniuk 2002, p. 103). Where the risk is real, so is the possibility of facing up to, and even *overcoming* it (a Nietzschean influence is palpable in this respect). In a world Palahniuk presents as occupied with preserving the present, Streator's journey helps him to come to terms with his past—contrary to Freud's view that the obsessive compulsive enacts rituals because of a need to repeat something in their past, repeating rather than remembering. As to the deaths Streator unwittingly inflicted on his own family, he discovers that "There are worse things you can do to the people you love than kill them" (Palahniuk 2002, p. 105). Palahniuk's novels go even further, however, in showing obsessionality as a *challenge* to the order of mass-media society, and even as a rebellion against it. It is no coincidence Streator's obsessionality strikes a blow against the perniciously intrusive mass media that prevents people from thinking for themselves when the culling song forces its way through his mind as he listens to the moralising radio presenter Dr Sara Lowenstein (Palahniuk 2002, p. 75), with the inevitable results.

At the beginning of *Lullaby*, reflecting on the wider existential debates that punctuate Palahniuk's work, Streator reflects:

> Experts in ancient Greek culture say that people back then didn't see their thoughts as belonging to them. When ancient Greeks had a thought, it occurred to them as a god or goddess giving an order. Apollo was telling them to be brave. Athens was telling them to fall in love. (Palahniuk 2002, p. 20)

These fears that the human subject is not in control of their thoughts are compounded in the novel's descriptions of a populace whose minds, without their consent, are occupied

with radio noise and advertising jingles; and in the anguish and guilt resulting from the protagonists' inability to prevent the culling song from penetrating their consciousness. Much of the novel, however, is also about healing; if we cannot entirely imagine the protagonists as being, like Camus' Sisyphus, "happy" (Camus [1942] 2005, p. 119), they are capable of coming to terms with the damage caused by their involuntary thoughts, and of learning, and enduring, and of wanting to do so. While there is much in the novel that is funny, comedy is, as L. C. Knights once observed, "essentially a serious activity" (Knights 1934, p. 111). If *Lullaby* is first and foremost a comedy, it is an existential comedy that celebrates the human ability to endure, an aspect of comedy as a genre that was important in its Classical origins but which the post/modern world has perhaps lost sight of. It exhibits "the comic spirit":

> . . . the sense that no matter how many times man is knocked down, he somehow manages to pull himself up and keep going. Thus, while tragedy is a celebration of man's capacity to aspire and suffer, comedy celebrates his capacity to endure. (Corrigan 1965, p. 3)

3. *Diary*, *Haunted*, and (Un-)Artistic Obsessions and Compulsions

In the Trilogy's second and third instalments, Palahniuk turns to questions of the relationship between obsessionality, compulsivity, and artistic endeavour, in both of the areas that Davis devotes a chapter to: visual art (Davis 2008, pp. 187–208), which is central to the plot of *Diary*, and writing (Davis 2008, pp. 105–24), which lies at the heart of *Haunted*. Davis argues for a tendency in post/modern culture to construct the production of art as a culturally acceptable obsessive compulsion, which contrasts with obsessions it regards as culturally unacceptable, such as committing irrational crimes. As such, he turns away from definitions of obsessive–compulsive behaviour that psychiatrists would acknowledge, which recognise only the performance of arbitrary compulsions (be they physical, mental, or both) as a means of diminishing or containing disturbing, intrusive thoughts. Instead, he documents what he sees as the post/modern cultural tendency to undertake certain activities repetitively, to some of which contemporary society grants its approval, while withholding it from others. In his chapter on visual art, for instance, Davis traces the "development over time of the link between obsession and value in art" (Davis 2008, p. 187). He argues that "The link between genius and obsession is assumed to be commonplace in our time" and that today, "the value of an artist increases if the work is seen as the product of an obsessive, sometimes life-destroying angst" (ibid.). To illustrate how modern Western culture (none of his examples are from outside of the political West) values such work he provides, to begin with, "two cultural roadmaps into obsession", one of which is Max Klinger, "an artist whose content and form is obsessive, but whose life is not"; and Adolf Wölfli, an artist who "is someone who is institutionalised and his art is seen as a product of his disability" (ibid.). He continues thereafter with studies of the career of the American artist Jay DeFeo, and particularly her production of *The Rose*, as "Art as Doing One Thing Obsessively" (Davis 2008, pp. 195–99); Mark Lombardi and his drawings of "the Obsession of the Network" in his *Narrative Structures* series (Davis 2008, pp. 199–205); and of the Down's syndrome artist Judith Scott as the "Outsider Inside Obsession" (Davis 2008, pp. 205–8). Davis' chapter on "Compulsive Writing, Graphomania, Bibliomania" (Davis 2008, p. 105), meanwhile, identifies the nineteenth century as the time when what he calls "obsessives in the cause of letters" (ibid.) emerged, initiating a change in the relationship between writing and obsessionality that has persisted until the present moment. Using the career of Emile Zola and Gustave Flaubert's novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet* as case studies, Davis argues that, by the fin de siécle, "Work, which had been the simple province of the peasants, the thing that kept them sane, is now transmuted to monomaniacal labor, most notably writing, which is no longer salutary but dangerous" (Davis 2008, p. 116).

There is, however, a point at which Davis' record of the modern cultural tendency to equate artistic "genius" with frenzied artistic practice intersects with more scientific accounts of obsessionality, and that common denominator is imagination. Veale and

Willson, for instance, agree with Davis that imagination is key to obsessionality. In a section about the physical and neurological causes of OCD, they describe the threat system in the "old brain", which governs the "fight or flight" mechanism. Threats in OCD, they note, come from the "new brain", which is "both invaluable—enabling us to figure out how to get to the moon or create a work of art—and our Achilles' heel as it allows us to *imagine* threats" (Veale and Willson 2021, p. 82; their italics). Palahniuk's two "artistic" comic horror novels once again meet at this conjunction, engaging to some degree with cultural–historical, psychiatric, and scientific understandings of obsessionality. To be transgressive in Palahniuk's novels, first one must have the necessary imagination to perceive a different world. Sometimes this leads to a situation in which there is nobody as obsessive, or transgressive, as the artist; though, as we shall see, other undeniably imaginative transgressionals are left frustrated when they attempt to channel their impulses through the prism of art.

As in *Lullaby*, in *Diary* (artistic) obsessive compulsiveness creates real risk, culminating in a massacre that cleanses Waytansea Island, which had become overrun by tourists, of commercialism. In this novel, the former art student Misty Marie Wilmot is deliberately subjected to painful physical and psychological privations in order to fulfil an old prophecy that once every century a great artist will save the island from outsiders. The word "Diary" is one that Palahniuk equates with art itself, since if imagination is necessary for artistic production, so is memory; "My fiction is simply a coded diary, and not just a diary of the past details, but a diary of the moments in which I was writing that diary" (Blum 2021), he has stated. The "Diary" of the book's title refers to a "coma diary" through which Misty tells the story of her husband, Peter, who has fallen into a coma after an apparent suicide attempt. Peter is a builder who, before supposedly trying to kill himself, was reshaping houses on the island by building secret rooms within them, but who appeared to have been compulsively scribbling terrible messages over the walls. The more Misty suffers, the more she redeems herself through compulsive artistic production, painting night and day, ascetically denying herself food and drink. When a hundred paintings have been completed, guests are invited to the grand unveiling of a montage of her work. While these guests are transfixed by Stendhal syndrome, paralysis induced by the wonder of art, the islanders burn the building to the ground:

> The images are worldwide. The bodies spread out on the street in front of the hotel. The charred corpses, black and crusted, cracked and showing the meat cooked inside, wet and red. In every shot, every camera angle, there's a corporate logo.
>
> Every second of video shows the blackened skeletons laid out in the parking lot. A total of one hundred and thirty-two so far, and above them, over them, somewhere in the frame, you see some corporate name. Some slogan, or smiling mascot. A cartoon tiger. A vague, upbeat motto.
>
> "Bonner & Mills—When You're Ready to Stop Starting Over."
>
> "Mewtworx—Where Progress Is Not Staying in One Place."
>
> What you don't understand, you can make mean anything.
>
> Some island car silk-screened with an advertisement is parked in every news shot. Some piece of paper trash, a cup or napkin is printed with a corporate name. You can read a billboard. Islanders are wearing their lapel buttons or T-shirts, doing television interviews with the twisted smoking bodies in the background. (Palahniuk 2003, p. 256)

Wary of being associated with the tragedy, investors pull out of the island, leaving the islanders self-supporting thanks to a mixture of the insurance and the advertising buy-back fees. It emerges that Peter's apparent suicide was actually a murder attempt to stop him from warning Misty of the plot; this is what he was scribbling about on the walls of the buildings.

If *Diary* is central to Palahniuk's conception of obsessive compulsiveness as an essentially imaginative, and therefore potentially artistic trait, Palahniuk lingers over the gifts of those with the "overconscientiousness" often associated with OCD. This manifests itself in both *Lullaby* and *Diary* as an obsessive attention to detail necessary on the part of a good reporter and artist, respectively, of a kind barely conceivable to a society with a collective attention deficit. Palahniuk has talked in interviews about this kind of obsessive attention to detail as having been central to his own craft both when he was a newspaper reporter and later, as a writer of fiction, saying that "No memory is ever thrown away . . . This compulsion to organize and preserve everything drives me to write" (Blum 2021). If scores of sentences in *Lullaby* begin with the words "The details about *x* are . . .", in *Diary*, they commence with "Just for the record . . ." While Palahniuk has frequently talked about the influence of Kierkegaard and Sartre upon his work, in the latter novel, Palahniuk expounds a theory of art that owes more than a little to Nietzsche's aphorism, "Deep suffering makes us noble. It separates" (Nietzsche [1885] 1998, p. 167):

> It wasn't until one of her kids died, [Peter] said, that Maura Kincaid ever painted a picture. He said, "Maybe people have to really suffer before they can risk doing what they love."
>
> You told Misty all this.
>
> You said how Michelangelo was a manic-depressive who portrayed himself as a flayed martyr in his painting. Henri Matisse gave up being a lawyer because of appendicitis. Robert Schumann only began composing after his right hand became paralyzed and ended his career as a concert pianist . . .
>
> You talked about Nietzsche and his tertiary spirits . . . "According to Thomas Mann," Peter said, "'Great artists are great invalids.'" (Palahniuk 2003, pp. 64–65)

Reflecting the kind of post/modern conception of art that Davis accounts for, and echoing comments about his own writerly practice cited above, Palahniuk contends that the creation of art is *painful*, the province of those occupied—consumed—by their obsessions:

> Peter used to say that an artist's job is to make order out of chaos. You collect details, look for a pattern, and organize. You make sense out of senseless facts. You puzzle together bits of everything. You shuffle and reorganize. Collage. Montage. Assemble. (Palahniuk 2003, p. 133)
>
> When you just cannot stop working. When completing this one project is all you can imagine. Then take a pill . . .
>
> Peter used to say, an artist's job is to pay attention, collect, organize, archive, preserve, then write a report. *Document. Make your presentation. The job of an artist is just not to forget.* (Palahniuk 2003, pp. 135–37, my italics)

Peter's account of what it is to be an artist, recounted by Misty, even replicates the exact phrase used by Streator when he was describing busying himself in obsessive activity while grieving his wife and daughter. They also echo Palahniuk's statement about himself that "If I wasn't such a packrat of memories . . . I doubt I'd be a writer at all" (Blum 2021). In equating such tendencies with the production of art, and in seemingly defining such tendencies against contemporary mass culture, Palahniuk constructs the present age as essentially "unartistic". There is a seeming contradiction here in *Diary* that is reminiscent of something similar in *Lullaby*. The latter depicts a dystopian society in which the populace is permanently distracted by invasive/intrusive media that inflicts a kind of mass attention deficit upon them; Streator and Helen represent a different order who, despite suffering from a primarily obsessional variant of OCD that has painful, real-world consequences, are nonetheless endowed with profound thought and feeling. In *Diary*, Misty and Peter are endowed with what are portrayed as the dual traits of obsessionality and a compulsive tendency towards artistic creation, differences from the rest of their culture that are synonymous with suffering, yet which may simultaneously be viewed as compensatory and redemptive.

Palahniuk's trilogy concludes with *Haunted: A Novel of Stories*, which seems almost like an inverted companion piece to *Diary*. The narratives of *Haunted* are again concerned with the relationships between obsessionality, compulsivity, and artistic creativity, this time with regard to writing. In contrast to *Lullaby* and *Diary*, *Haunted* serves as a cautionary tale that not all obsessions and compulsions necessarily lead those who experience them to a transcendence of the worst values of wider society, or to the nobility of art. If *Diary* depicts an obsession, as defined by modern popular culture, that Davis would contend contemporary society approves of, *Haunted* is an account of the kind of obsessions and compulsions that it rejects. As David McCracken has demonstrated (McCracken 2016, p. 21), *Haunted*'s narrative is a comic horror frame-story that is a "postmodern parody" of Boccaccio's *The Decameron*. Its grim assortment of characters are participants on an ill-fated three-month writer's retreat in a sealed-off, disused theatre from which they cannot escape, all of them desperate to become great writers. Another of *Haunted*'s intertextual allusions seems to be to Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*, the world's best-selling crime novel. The revelation at the former's denouement that Brandon Whittier, who lured the would-be writers to the retreat only to imprison them, had faked his death, clearly replicates the device by which Christie's Mr. Justice Wargrave remained secretly alive after his apparent death to continue tormenting his guinea pigs. Each of *Haunted*'s characters delivers at least one supposedly biographical story, usually standing on the abandoned theatre's stage, and some relate more. Obsessions and compulsions sometimes feature prominently in these stories, either in the terms delineated previously that psychiatrists would recognise, or in the everyday contexts in which post/modern cultures have co-opted them. We are aware throughout that the protagonists have a very different moral compass from the sympathetic protagonists of the previous novels—indeed, many have perpetrated just the kind of acts that those with primarily obsessional OCD dread, and which Carl and Helen spend *Lullaby* trying to avoid. Potentially, the reader may attribute this to a satirical depiction of contemporary popular culture's understandings of obsessionality and compulsivity that harks back to the depictions of a risk-preoccupied media culture in *Lullaby*, though, as always in these novels, more scientific explanations are available. The *DSM-5*, for instance, provides several pieces of information that seem relevant to the behaviour of *Haunted*'s protagonists, including that compulsive behaviours can exist apart from obsessions, especially where sexuality, gambling, and substance (mis-)use are concerned (American Psychiatric Association 2013, pp. 241–42) and that there is some evidence of a link between OCD and impulse disorders (American Psychiatric Association 2013, p. 242).

"Ritual" (Palahniuk 2006, pp. 201–5), told by the character referred to as the Match-maker, perhaps features an account of behaviour that corresponds most closely to the *DSM-5* definition of OCD. As its title suggests, the story is about a compulsion performed by the male members of a family to make the sound "shoo-rook" (there is a suitably macabre origin story about how this came about) to ward off any disturbing, intrusive thought that something bad might happen. In "Cassandra" by Mrs. Clark (Palahniuk 2006, pp. 349–54), the protagonist compulsively performs housework. She turns mattresses, washes the second-floor windows, dusts the top edge of the baseboards, and cleans the fireplace (Palahniuk 2006, p. 350), all to banish the thought at that any moment she is going to receive a phone call conveying that the naked body of her dead daughter has been found. It is she herself, however, who is the killer—underscoring the differences between the protagonists of these stories and their equivalents in the previous two novels. Multiple stories are concerned with deviant sexual compulsions, which usually lead to negative consequences (to put it mildly) for those concerned. These include Saint Gut-Free's "Guts" (Palahniuk 2006, pp. 12–21), which began life as a stand-alone short story, and was already one of Palahniuk's most in/famous creations by the time it was incorporated into *Haunted*; Mother Nature's "Foot Work" (Palahniuk 2006, pp. 30–39); and Director Denial's "Exodus" (Palahniuk 2006, pp. 155–71). Lady Baglady's story "Slumming" (Palahniuk 2006, pp. 67–80) is a satire upon the compulsion to social snobbery and to construct artificial

social hierarchies. Several stories are concerned with either the compulsion to kill or the obsession with success at any cost, including killing, such as the Earl of Slander's "Swan Song" (Palahniuk 2006, pp. 92–98), and the Duke of Vandals' "Ambition" (Palahniuk 2006, pp. 127–33). Several stories document the obsessive, ruminative fear of the protagonist/s of leaving the world as it is unless they do something drastic to, in the words of the Reverend Godless in his story "Punch Drunk", "make the world a better place" (Palahniuk 2006, p. 191), which may equally be said of Cora in "Exodus". A repeated obsession of the protagonists is with trying to uncover metaphysical truths—to be the one, in the words of a phrase that is used more than once, operating "The camera behind the camera behind the camera" (Palahniuk 2006, p. 83). Another is with the fear that being at the retreat will not provide sufficient sanctuary to escape their past deeds (see, for instance, Palahniuk 2006, p. 44).

However, the retreat's participants lack the obsessive devotion (according to its popular understanding within post/modern culture) to their desired craft that would be necessary to achieve their aims, of the kind demonstrated by *Diary*'s Misty. The would-be writers present initially as having the same attention to detail as Carl Streator and Misty and Peter Wilmot; the Earl of Slander, apparently a journalist, gets on the bus to take them to the retreat with a pocket notepad to write down observations and "a silver tape recorder peeking out of his shirt pocket" (Palahniuk 2006, pp. 3–4); and Agent Tattletale brings a video camera to record everything (Palahniuk 2006, p. 7). But this counterfeit devotion results in anything but the frenzied writing that might have been expected if the participants exhibited Misty's artistic fervour. Aware that there is "No one working. No writing getting done" (Palahniuk 2006, p. 40), they begin to make excuses: Lady Baglady claims that she cannot write anything "profound" if her environment "isn't . . . ideal" (Palahniuk 2006, p. 40); the Matchmaker finds himself uninspired because the derelict theatre is nothing like the "writer's colony he's pictured" (Palahniuk 2006, p. 41); Miss America—who is pregnant—cannot write because "Her breasts were too sore to write. Her arms too tired" (ibid.). Having expressed their misgivings, "everyone said they'd still write their work, their poems and stories. They'd complete their masterpiece. Just not here. Not now. Later, outside" (Palahniuk 2006, p. 44). Shortly afterwards, "nothing happens . . . Nothing happened and nothing kept happening . . . And nothing more happens. More nothing happens" (Palahniuk 2006, p. 59). A comic grotesque satire (see McCracken 2020 monograph for a wider study of the mode within Palahniuk's oeuvre) upon the post/modern desire to attain celebrity, if there is anything that *Haunted*'s dramatic personae are truly obsessive *about*, in the post/modern cultural sense, it is the quest for fame. They are "People looking for one idea that would echo for the rest of time. Echo into books, movies, plays, songs, television, T-shirts, money" (Palahniuk 2006, p. 82). They have more in common with the materialists who exploit Misty's art for their own financial gain, than with Misty herself.

In Davis' terms, those who attend the retreat discover that they cannot simply exchange their obsessions and compulsions, largely those of which post/modern society does not approve, for the more acceptable obsession of writing. They have sufficient imagination to conceive of the world as other than it is, and therefore to have committed transgressive acts, but not, it seems, the ability to channel that imagination into the creation of fiction. Given the actions committed by many of the novel's protagonists, it would have been much better if they *had* channelled their imagination solely into fiction. Carl and Helen in *Lullaby* and Misty and Peter in *Diary* are generally presented sympathetically; the satire in these novels is directed at the societies from which they stand apart. In *Haunted*, the satire is directed first and foremost at the protagonists, but also and equally at the society of which they too are a part. Children of a culture in which successful writers must be seen to be obsessed by their art and compelled to practise it feverishly, it is their inability to conform to these expectations that renders them suitable objects of satire. It is fitting that one of the major choruses (in Palahniuk's terms) that many of them repeat concerns their inability to escape and find sanctuary. It is not, however, the disused theatre building that confines them,

ultimately; as McCracken suggests (McCracken 2016, pp. 20–21), they are imprisoned by their inability to escape themselves.

4. Conclusions

On one level, *Lullaby* and other Palahniuk novels seem to illustrate the transgressive potential that has always been represented by the social model of disability, rewriting the problems and challenges faced by those who are categorised as "disabled" as those of society's unwillingness to embrace and accommodate difference, rather than those caused by any medical disability in itself. *Lullaby* contrasts the cognitive intrusions experienced by its protagonists with those experienced by society at large, while suggesting that the former have the potential to allow for the protagonists (and possibly members of wider society) to think for themselves again. For this reason, it is impossible to detach discussions of the novel's representations of obsessionality from wider discussions of Palahniuk's standard theme of transgressing society's standards and values. But *Lullaby* also depicts, as I have demonstrated, the struggle of what is experienced by those afflicted with primarily obsessional OCD, from intrusive and involuntary dystonic thoughts that cause horror because of thought–action fusion, to attempts to control one's cognitive activity through common techniques such as thought blocking and thought switching. Hence, *Lullaby*'s complicated representations of obsessionality could be interpreted as endorsing elements of both the medical and social models.

Palahniuk's novels represent obsessions, compulsions, and OCD in a decidedly protean manner. The novels discussed in this essay perhaps cannot be interpreted directly using the paradigm for reading literary representations of disability provided by Mitchell and Snyder in their influential *Narrative Prosthesis*, as they are concerned with the relationship between "narrative in general and the corporeal body" (Mitchell and Snyder [1997] 2007, p. 205). Notwithstanding the widespread philosophical shift away from Descartes' mind–body duality and towards the view that the brain must be treated as just another part of the body, the relationship between bodily disability and mental health disorders, and the question of how to theorise this relationship, remains both evolving and unresolved. Nonetheless, some of Mitchell and Snyder's ideas can be used to demonstrate the complexities of Palahniuk's representations. Their central opening complaint that "Nearly every culture views disability as a problem in need of a solution" (Mitchell and Snyder [1997] 2007, p. 204) is something of which, in *Lullaby* at least, Palahniuk himself might be declared not guilty. It is more the case that a painful and destructive primarily obsessional OCD is presented as a means of saving people from the problems of mass society, rather than the other way around. At the same time, it might be objected that this primarily obsessional OCD is used precisely as a means of making a metaphorical criticism of this wider society (Mitchell and Snyder [1997] 2007, p. 205), something that lies at the heart of the theory of narrative prosthesis itself. If "readings of disability [act] as a narrative device upon which the literary writer of 'open-ended' narratives depends for his or her disruptive punch" (Mitchell and Snyder [1997] 2007, p. 206), few hit harder than Palahniuk, the arch literary purveyor of transgression. While Palahniuk's novels are overtly fantastical in nature, it might be said that Palahniuk implies in *Lullaby* and *Diary* that those who demonstrate obsessive and compulsive behaviours (broadly conceived) possess compensatory and redemptive abilities beyond those of the multitude. On the one hand, this could be seen as a reflection of Davis' arguments that contemporary Western societies have sub-divided obsessions and compulsions into those that are desirable and praiseworthy, and into those that are the opposite, with the protagonists of *Haunted* largely falling into the latter category. It could also be seen, however, as a perpetuation of a common cultural stereotype which risks failing to portray realistically the daily suffering of countless millions throughout the world with obsessive and/or compulsive disorders, for some of whom there are no compensations. After all, there is plenty of evidence of how intractable and difficult to treat OCD can be (see Davis 2008, pp. 228–29). It is exactly these various contradictions in Palahniuk's representations of obsessions and compulsions

in the Horror Trilogy that "[situate] people with disabilities in a profoundly ambivalent relationship to the cultures and stories they inhabit" (Mitchell and Snyder [1997] 2007, p. 204).

As the "cultural obsessionality studies" of which I wrote earlier develop, studies of representations of obsessions, compulsions, and OCD in American fictions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries should emerge prominently. A (very) conservative list of some of the works that should be of interest might include those as rich and diverse as, in no particular order, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*; Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*; Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*; Steve Martin's *The Pleasure of my Company*; Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*; Eric Garcia's *Matchstick Men*; and many others. Chuck Palahniuk's fictions deserve a place in the list also, including those beyond the three considered here. As Palahniuk studies builds on the critical coming of age attained with publication of the first monograph-length studies of his works, the prominence of his representations of obsessions, compulsions, and OCD, but also of the contradictions within them, ensures that they must be given their due.

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