

BRUNA MISKINIS SALGADO

**WE ARE ALL LIVING IN THE WORLD THAT IS BRANDY ALEXANDER:
HYPERREALITY, BEAUTY AND MONSTROSITY IN *INVISIBLE MONSTERS***

PORTO ALEGRE

2023

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL
PROGRAMA DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM LETRAS
ESTUDOS DE LITERATURA
SOCIEDADE, (INTER)TEXTOS LITERÁRIOS E TRADUÇÃO NAS LITERATURAS
ESTRANGEIRAS MODERNAS

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2023

CIP - Catalogação na Publicação

Salgado, Bruna Miskinis

We are all living in the world that is brandy
alexander: Hyperreality, beauty and monstrosity in
Invisible Monsters / Bruna Miskinis Salgado. -- 2023.
102 f.

Orientador: Claudio Vescia Zanini.

Dissertação (Mestrado) -- Universidade Federal do
Rio Grande do Sul, Instituto de Letras, Programa de
Pós-Graduação em Letras, Porto Alegre, BR-RS, 2023.

1. Invisible Monsters. 2. Chuck Palahniuk. 3.
Beleza. 4. Monstruosidade. 5. Hiper-realidade. I.
Zanini, Claudio Vescia, orient. II. Título.

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Porto Alegre, 15 de maio de 2023.

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Thank you, mom, for teaching me to believe in myself.

Thank you, dad, for teaching me to be myself.

Thank you, Eliezer, for sharing your life with me.

Thank you, Claudio, for sharing with me your love for coffee, monsters, and Chuck Palahniuk.

*You'd think I'd be smarter now after, what?
Sixteen hundred college credits. I should be
smarter. I could be a doctor by now.
Sorry, Mom. Sorry, God.*

(Chuck Palahniuk, Invisible Monsters)

RESUMO

Beleza e monstruosidade normalmente são vistas como opostas uma à outra, mas nos últimos anos, esses conceitos têm sido colocados lado-a-lado, com monstros bonitos cada vez mais presentes nas mídias, de vampiros a assassinos em série. Em *Invisible Monsters*, de Chuck Palahniuk, nós vemos as articulações desses conceitos, conforme os personagens se movem no espectro de beleza e de monstruosidade. Os personagens principais da história são a Shannon (a narradora), uma ex-modelo que se torna monstruosa ao atirar na própria cara; e o Shane, um homem transformado em uma mulher, a Brandy, não porque ele queria ser mulher, mas precisamente porque ele não queria. Os corpos desses personagens transitam entre convenções de gênero, tornando-os marginalizados em uma sociedade que tanto valoriza aparências. Considerando as teses do Cohen (1996), percebemos que esses personagens se tornam monstruosos ao representar os medos de nossa sociedade, sendo pessoas que não se conformam às funções esperadas e que transitam entre categorias, salientando a crise de categorias na sexualidade. Eles também fazem movimentos opostos na direção da beleza, de formas que se opõem ao esperado quando consideramos o gênero em que eles nasceram (WOLF, 2002). Como um dos resultados desses movimentos, Brandy se torna tão bonita, que ela se torna sublime, conforme a definição utilizada por Burke (2009), sendo a sua beleza tão próxima dos padrões de beleza inatingíveis, que ela se torna hiper-real, um simulacro de beleza, conforme as definições de Baudrillard (1994). Ela se torna como uma deusa no mundo da Shannon, reinando suprema sobre ela. Considerando esses conceitos e como eles figuram no romance, eu discuto como ambas as personagens articulam suas monstruosidades de formas físicas e morais, olhando para suas belezas e monstruosidades tanto como opostas quanto como alinhadas durante a história.

Palavras-chave: *Invisible Monsters*; Chuck Palahniuk; Beleza; Monstruosidade; Hiper-realidade.

ABSTRACT

Beauty and monstrosity are usually thought of as opposite to each other, but in recent years, these concepts have been put side by side, with beautiful monsters ever more present in our media, from vampires to serial killers. In Chuck Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters*, we see the articulation of these concepts, as the characters move in the spectrum of beautiful and monstrous. The main characters in the novel are Shannon (the narrator), a former model turned monstrous by shooting her own face off; and Shane, a man turned into a woman, Brandy, not because he wants to, but precisely because he does not. These characters' bodies transit through gender conventions, making them marginalized in a society that values appearance so much. Considering Cohen's theses (1996), we see these characters becoming monsters, as they represent what society fears, people who do not conform to their expected roles and also transit between categories, highlighting the category crisis in sexuality. They also make mirroring movements towards and away from beauty, again, in ways that oppose the expected when considering their birth gender (WOLF, 2002). As one of the results of these movements, Brandy becomes so beautiful, that she becomes sublime, as Burke (2009) defines it, her beauty so close to the unattainable beauty standards, that she becomes hyperreal, a simulacrum of beauty, per Baudrillard's (1994) definitions. She becomes this godly figure in Shannon's world, reigning supreme over her life. By looking at these concepts and how they present in the novel, I discuss how both characters articulate their monstrosity in physical and moral ways, looking at their beauty and monstrosity as both opposing and aligned through the novel.

Key words: *Invisible Monsters*; Chuck Palahniuk; Beauty; Monstrosity; Hyperreality.

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1 Introduction

*The photographer in my head says: Give me
patience.*

Flash.

Give me control.

Flash.

The situation is I have half a face.

(Chuck Palahniuk)

I have a recurring dream, in which I am driving along the road I used to take every day while living at my parents' house, except that, in the dream, to the right, in the near distance, I can see an enormous erupting volcano. It is a terrifying experience, after all, a volcano that big could absolutely decimate everything around it. Except that, in the dream, I know that I am far enough that the destruction cannot reach me, and even if it could, I can drive away in time. In this dream, I watch as the volcano spews lava and ashes in this late-afternoon setting, with plumes of dark ash covering the sky.

Notice that I call it a dream, not a nightmare. From this dream, I wake with a feeling of awe and wanderlust. It is not like a nightmare, from which I wake tense, scared or afraid. In this dream, I know that there is no reason to be afraid, even while knowing that a volcanic eruption of that size can be devastating. The contemplation of something that could cause such destruction, while knowing that it cannot inflict its power on you, is the source of the sublime.

I have had the opportunity to experience the sublime a few times, which probably is what fueled my interest in this topic. As a small child, I remember two very distinctly sublime moments in a road trip with my parents through Argentina and Chile. The first, as we were passing the Andes, that the mountains are so tall, that to cross it, the road had to make a zigzag pattern with hairpin turns so tight to itself that to one side you would see a sheer wall, while to the other side you could not see any part of the road. And everywhere, the black mountains topped with white snow towering over the road. The second experience was seeing the volcano Osorno with smoke coming out of its peak, as we passed near it on the road.

These experiences are akin to what Burke (2009)¹ describes as sublime, when there is a reason to be afraid, yet you are somewhat safe from it. We crave sublime experiences, but they are hard to come by, other than in fiction. For a long time, religion was the main source of the sublime for nearly everyone. God's power was absolute. However, once religion fell out of grace and humanity started focusing on its own power, there was a need for another source of sublime experiences. Romanticism found it in nature, with vast oceans, unclimbable mountains, and devastating storms. These sights might be beautiful, but they are also awe-inspiring, and, in the right presentation, terrible and intimidating. Thinking of these views, beauty and terror are not necessarily as opposites, as we might be inclined to traditionally think.

In the past few years, I became interested in true crime stories, for example, in the podcast *My Favorite Murder*, which is a true crime comedy podcast by Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark. In several episodes they make comments about how certain killers or rapists look very normal, and once they commented about some people's criticism of Zac Efron's portrayal of Ted Bundy in the movie *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (2019) for Efron being too beautiful for the part. That got me thinking on how we correlate being beautiful with being good and being ugly with being bad.

While thinking about this topic, I remembered when I was in high school and my friends were discussing about why it is wrong to say something is ugly when it is bad or wrong, which is quite common in Portuguese. I only needed around 15 years of thought to really understand what they meant. They were talking about the way society deifies beautiful people. When you are beautiful, you can do no wrong.

In order to discuss why society does this, I started looking at monsters in a different way from what most classical stereotypes usually portray. Monster theory largely agrees with Cohen's (1996) thesis that monsters are defined by the cultures that create them. Monsters are a mirror to that culture's fears, be that the darkness of the night, the dangers of the forest or wild animals, or even the AIDS epidemic. We can look at the monsters created by a culture to understand that culture and what it fears.

We must bear in mind that a culture is defined not only by a region on a map or nationality, but also the time it is set in. According to Eco (2004), culture is merely the term we

¹ Edmund Burke originally wrote about the sublime in 1757, as a response for the ideas held at the time regarding aesthetics. However, the edition that was used as reference for this discussion was published in 2009.

use for the history which happens to be happening right now. Neither culture nor history is a well-defined continuous, but rather mash-ups of moments, bound together by the time in which they happen. Therefore, to understand them, we must also be willing to make some assumptions regarding themes that are loosely bound by those moments.

The loosely bound themes I will be looking at are beauty and monstrosity. I call them loosely bound because, to see them in the perspective I propose, we will have to unstitch them from their usual positions. Beauty and monstrosity are usually put in contrast to each other, *The Beauty and the Beast* being the most obvious example. Here, however, I propose that we relocate these traditionally opposing concepts and watch how they behave when they are put on the same side of the story.

The traditional monster story is starting to give way to a more nuanced view of monsters, as illustrated by the books and movies of the *Twilight* series. There, instead of dying to the sun, the vampires shine like so many precious expensive things. As a matter of fact, a lot of the analysis of 21st century monsters revolve around *Twilight*, probably because of its popularity. This popularity opened the space for other works with beautiful monsters to come to light and for the examinations of other works with beautiful monsters.

Choosing a work with beautiful monsters to analyze was fairly easy. In 2018, I took an undergraduate class about Gothic Literature and Horror Fiction with Professor Claudio Zanini, who would later supervise me during my Master's. My end-of-course project then was about monsters as protagonists, using the video clips from Marilyn Manson's *SAY10* and Die Antwoord's *UGLY BOY*. At the end of my presentation, the professor suggested that I should read the book *Invisible Monsters*, since its story is about beauty and monstrosity, the topics my presentation was focused on. He disclaimed that he was a little biased towards it, since his own doctoral dissertation was about *Haunted*, another novel by the writer, Chuck Palahniuk.

Invisible Monsters is narrated by Shannon McFarland in flashbacks that are not in chronological order. Shannon used to be a fashion model and was obsessed with being beautiful. She gets shot in the face and loses her mandible, becoming a monster to her own (and most other people's) eyes. She meets Brandy Alexander, and they end up living on the road with Shannon's ex-fiancé, Manus, stealing drugs from rich people's houses and selling them at nightclubs. Closer to the end of the novel, we find out that Shannon shot herself in the face, because she realized that she was addicted to being beautiful and saw being irreversibly ugly as the only way out. The book's theme of fashion and the characters' monstrousness make it

prime for the type of analysis that this research aims at – namely, to understand the connections between beauty and monstrosity.

Considering that the novel was written in the early 1990s, it is no wonder that social media does not appear in the story. The novel does, however, reflect themes that have become much discussed in the 2020s, especially regarding the ideas of beauty as an unattainable concept. In the age of Instagram influencers, beauty has reached new standards, where photos and even videos of people doing day-to-day mundane things, like eating or cleaning the house can be heavily edited and still be read as somewhat true. The documentary *Fake Famous* (BILTON, 2021) shows the lengths to which some people go through in order to be famous in certain social media, which makes evident the surreal expectations regarding beauty. A considerable part of the experiences posted by famous people and anonymous alike on social media is faked to some extent. If even the rich and famous edit their lives in order to appear more beautiful, what chance do seemingly ordinary people have when comparing their actual lives to the ones seen on social media?

This can be traced to Agamben's (1993) theory that postmodern culture has lost access to experiences, and that a "modern man's average day contains virtually nothing that can still be translated into experience" (1993, p.13). He refers to day-to-day city life, with news, traffic jams, random violence we see on the street, and many other events that barely touch our lives. That is even more true in Shannon McFarland's life. Being a model, she represents what people want but cannot have. As a model, she is a product to be consumed, the aspiration point we should all be aiming at. Yet, the things she portrays are not real, as is evident in chapter sixteen of the book, when she and Evie are at a photoshoot. It takes place at a junkyard among rusty cars. They both have to look pretty and sexy, while wearing uncomfortably small clothes, being worried for their safety, and carrying heavy tools, and meanwhile Evie casually asks about Shannon's estranged brother. The situation could not be farther from beautiful or sexy, and yet, that is the exact concept that photoshoot is selling.

At the root of the concepts that this type of photoshoot sells to the consumer is that of beauty. When we think of beauty as a concept, usually we think about works of art, such as paintings or sculptures on display at a museum. However, when we think of a photo selling clothes with thin, blonde models amid old, rusted, destroyed cars, we do not tend to think that it is art. A beautiful model posing semi-naked to sell clothes usually does not correspond to the same beauty we see when admiring art at a museum.

Art, according to Eco (2004), no longer focuses on natural beauty. After the avant-garde movements, most artists “go against the ideas that ordinary people have about Beauty” (p. 417). Modern and postmodern art deal with and around the beauty of provocation; their objective is to entice people into asking questions. One might even consider an event such as a rock concert as art, which Eco equates to a “quasi-religious experience, albeit of a carnal and primitive sort, from which the gods are absent” (p. 417). It is not the purpose of this research to define art, something many have already done, or, at least, tried to. As we see in Eco’s (2004) writing, every individual’s relation to and perspective on art is different, since it is such a subjective aspect of human creation. The perspectives referenced and discussed in this research are the ones that enrich the discussion the most.

As Couchot (2019) discusses, the concept of beauty has expanded in the last decades. It now encompasses common objects, food, makeup, fashion, and the cult of the body. This is the natural evolution of the art regimen, to no longer be rooted only in object production. As the author states, art, at least in western culture, has a peculiar set of praxis, destined to be ephemeral. It likely does not outlive a society or culture and sure did not always exist. Fashion subscribes to these rules, of what Eco (2004) calls the beauty of consumption, which follows the ideals of ephemeral beauty. These ideals are usually in direct contrast to the beauty of provocation, and yet they coexist.

The 21st century model of beauty is filled with doubles that do not exactly cancel each other out, but rather exist fulfilling different segments of consumerism. There is the concept of beauty that is in fashion magazines, advertisements, and movies: skinny girls and muscled men. Even the people that are displayed as beauty models in these media, however, have their photos and videos heavily edited in order to appear more beautiful, skinnier, with smoother skins and, in general, leave no signal of actually living in their bodies. Taking that into consideration, it becomes impossible for anyone to achieve these goals. And, even if you do not consider these models as the aspiring point for beauty, there are other profiles of beauty that you can aspire to (but never quite reach). Eco (2004) finishes his book by saying that an observer from the future would “have to surrender before the orgy of tolerance, the total syncretism and the absolute and unstoppable polytheism of Beauty” (p. 428). However, this tolerance is towards other types of beauty, and it is not exactly peaceful.

Different groups of people have very different ideals of beauty. If one person finds a woman with tattoos to be beautiful, another might think it is horrible. As Braunberger (2000)

states, a woman's body is a body to be consumed, and while plastic surgery, weight control and cosmetics usually go in the way of conforming to normality and beauty associated to certain standards, tattoos (at least in western culture) reflect the desire to stand out, to express one's own personality – or, in certain situations – to fit in to a specific group.

Shannon, as a model, is striving to conform to very strict body standards, considered most attractive. She calls Evie's piercings and surgeries *self-mutilation*. Ng (2009) talks about self-mutilation as a motif in the novel, through which “Shannon and Brandy both enact profound performances of physical disfigurement to escape the culture industry, and to relocate experience back within themselves” (p. 26). It is the mutilation of their own bodies that at the same time makes them conform to society and ostracizes them.

Their bodies are the focus of their mutilations, just as they are the focus of the narrative. It is through their bodies that we see their monstrousness. As Cohen (1996) points out in his first thesis, “the monstrous body is pure culture”. In view of that, we must understand the cultural situation that allowed for the creation of a monstrous fashion model. If the monster reflects the culture that created it, we must wonder what in our culture allowed for the postcard of beauty to become monstrous. As a monstrous female body, Shannon becomes invisible to normal society, only recognized by those who are also ostracized from society, either because they have no family, are thieves, use drugs or are in some sort of transition between male and female.

At the same time, it is the mutilations of the bodies that makes them the epitome of beauty. The effort they put into being beautiful and maintaining their beauty makes them unhappy, but it does make them beautiful, sexy, desirable. But there are things that even all the surgeries they go through cannot change. Shannon can never get her entire face back, Brandy will always have big hands, Evie will never be a perfect size six. And everybody knows that the devil is in the details.

These details are the things that turn the characters from perfectly beautiful into pariahs and monsters. That is the realm of the uncanny, as described by Freud (2018)². The uncanny is that which is sufficiently familiar to be recognized, and yet has some kind of wrongness that might not be instantly clear. It is that tingling sense of wrong that cannot be explained when

² Freud wrote about the Uncanny originally in 1919, but the work used as reference for this discussion was published in 2018.

you see a robot that is too similar to a human being, and yet clearly non-human. The uncanny is that which is supposed to be hidden but has somehow surfaced. Through Shannon's point of view, we find it uncanny to see a man's hand on a model-like beautiful woman, to see breasts and tears from a macho-man, to see a deformed face in a model. Shannon is herself the vehicle of the societal norms she deformed herself to escape. That leaves us with the sensation that those norms are inescapable.

Levina and Bui (2013) analyze monster culture in the 21st century, arguing, through the ideas of Robin Wood, that the Other is not external to our culture, but rather the representation of what we must suppress in order to adapt into the normative society. They call it "surplus repression" and state that this is not needed for civilized society, but rather a requirement of capitalist patriarchal society. It is what makes us monogamous, heterosexual, and bourgeois. We see that in *Invisible Monsters* very clearly, since the main character shoots herself in the face in order to make herself not beautiful and after becoming a monster (by her standards) she starts living on the road with her ex-fiancé and a trans woman. They pretend to be royalty and live by stealing from the rich. They become the embodiment of what capitalist patriarchal society wishes did not exist: queer, thieves, pretenders, drug users.

Levina and Bui (2013) also state that classifying monsters as "good" or "bad" is just the starting point of the interpretation of what monsters are. They point out that more recent studies focus on monsters as a fluid category, capable of change. Since monsters are a reflection of humans, and humans are capable of amazing goodness and unbelievable evil, it is only logical that so too are monsters. At the end of the novel, after showing she can be a monster by trying to kill her friends, Shannon makes the ultimate sacrifice by leaving her life to be lived by the trans woman who was once her brother and now wishes to be exactly like her.

While looking for other research about the same topics, I found works about monsters in contemporary culture (LEVINA; BUI, 2013; WEINSTOCK, 2012), about monstrosity and beauty (BRAUNBERGER, 2000; JOLLIMORE; BARRIOS, 2004), and about Palahniuk's work (JACOBSEN, 2013; KUHN; RUBIN, 2009; ZANINI, 2011). What seems to be lacking is a work that brings these topics together, analyzing *Invisible Monsters* as a work of contemporary culture through the lens of beauty and monstrosity.

In order to discuss these concepts, I bring the views of established theorists of each field, appropriating their discussions and analyses as the supporting pillars of my own discussion and analysis. With the objective of understanding how the characters' beauty interacts with their

monstrosity, this thesis will be divided into four main sections, the first being this one. The methodology used will be qualitative bibliographical research.

The second chapter focuses on monstrosity, beauty and the sublime. Firstly, I present further discussions about Cohen's view of the monstrous body and Freud's uncanny. The role of gender in monstrosity is also tackled, focusing on Shannon and Brandy's unique articulations of monstrosity. In the next part of chapter 2, I discuss beauty, starting with a broader discussion on the topic, bringing Couchot, Burke and Eco's views, followed by a discussion on beauty in art, and in fashion. For the analysis of *Invisible Monsters*, the most important concept of beauty is that of the fashion shows and magazines since most of the characters are involved with that world. In order to fully understand their ideals of beauty, further discussion about beauty and gender performance takes place in this section, to understand what and why our society sees as beautiful, focusing on the realm of beauty of consumption. To finish this chapter, I bring Burke's discussion on the sublime, highlighting aspects that can be applied to the novel, and especially to Brandy.

The third chapter brings two topics that relate more to the novel per se than to the proposed discussion. They are, however, fundamental to understanding Palahniuk's writing and the characters' gender roles in the story. In the first part, I bring some concepts proposed by Baudrillard to understand postmodernism and, specifically, the state of thinking at the time the novel was written. More specifically, I bring up some ideas that help understand his views on hyperreality and its influences in our culture. Afterwards, I bring Halberstam's discussion on transgender bodies and her³ understanding regarding queer time and space, the dimensions occupied by our characters in the novel.

The fourth chapter consists of a close reading of the book, showing how those concepts intertwine throughout the story, highlighting passages where beauty and monstrosity interact. Focusing firstly on Shannon's beauty and later on Brandy's sublime, I discuss how the topics presented in the previous chapters apply to the story, to the characters, and to their views on life, society and reality.

³ Halberstam is a trans man, however, at the time of writing *In a queer time and place*, he still went by Judith, which is why here I refer to him as a woman, as it is how it appears in the source.

In the final part, the final remarks section, I present the findings of the discussion, highlighting the most important aspects of monstrosity, beauty and the sublime on both of the main characters.

With the structure of this work explained, let us jump into the theories that help us understand the hyperreal world of Brandy Alexander.

2 Monstrosity & Beauty (or multiple monstrous iterations)

Give me romance.

Flash.

Give me denial.

(Chuck Palahniuk)

As the central themes to this discussion, beauty, monstrosity and the sublime come first in this work, as the grounding stones on which I built my argument. To start connecting these themes, we need firstly to understand exactly what these terms mean, at least for the purposes of this thesis. In order to do so this chapter presents some supporting terminology and discusses how they connect to each other and to the themes of the novel. The discussion about monstrosity centers around Cohen's (1996) seven theses about monsters and Freud's Uncanny, as well as on how both these theories can help us understand the characters. Afterwards, in order to approach beauty, I will discuss its presence in art, in fashion, and its representation in the novel.

2.1 Monstrosity (or defining humanness)

Give me violent revenge fantasies as a coping mechanism.

Flash.

Just give me my first opportunity.

Flash.

(Chuck Palahniuk)

Classic monsters, such as vampires, werewolves, and zombies, have always had their space in our stories, with their representations of fears evolving through the years. The resurgence of vampires in the last few decades, for example, seems to be linked to the fear of the HIV spread, especially within the LGBT community (LAVIGNE, 2004; PREVAS, 2018). These evolutions in monsters and their meaning follow our own society's evolution and fears. These fears are usually found on "the Other", that is, those who are not "us". The Other can be women, Jews, queers, poor people, or any other group of minorities.

Traditionally, when we think of monsters, we imagine things such as vampires, ghosts, and werewolves. However, if we think of more recent media, especially in the horror genre, we see much more nuanced readings on what monstrosity can be. Over the last few decades, we see a clear trend towards more human depictions of monsters: M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999) and Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* (2001) both have very human ghosts, while Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (2000), for example, shows us a truly human monster. Over the last few years, this trend seems to be gaining strength, with some of the most successful horror movies of the last few years focusing much more on how humans can be monstrous than on paranormal or supernatural entities. Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019), Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015), and Jordan Peele's *Get Out!* (2017) and *Us* (2019) have a much clearer focus on society and humans as the source of pain and horror (PASZKIEWICZ; RUSNAK, 2020) than the previous era of blockbuster horror movies, such as the *Paranormal Activity* and *The Conjuring* series. While this does not, at least yet, spell the end of paranormal or supernatural horror movies, it seems that this trend coincides with Chuck Palahniuk's early works and Jean Baudrillard's core reflections on simulacra and simulation.

The depictions of monstrosity in movies such as *Get Out!* is clearly pointing towards humans, without the use of allegories of vampires or ghosts. This might reflect the evolution of

hyperreality, as proposed by Baudrillard (1994). As we struggle to fight against the loss of meaning, we create stories that no longer use allegories, but represent things that we might actually see in real life (or in our interpretation of what real life is, i.e., social media and the news). Further discussion on hyperreality is mainly in chapter 3.1. Here, I bring it up as a way for us to understand that this change is brought by our society, by the evolution of our culture, by late-stage capitalism. This loss of reference of reality apparently weakens our allegories, as we no longer have the direct connection to the original concepts that generate these allegories.

2.1.1 Seven theses (or the entrance into this book of monstrous content)

Give me anger.

Flash.

Give me vengeance.

Flash.

Give me total and complete justified retribution.

Flash.

(Chuck Palahniuk)

Monsters are cultural beings, they act as a mirror to the culture that creates them, highlighting these cultures' fears and yearnings. When we consider monsters from Cohen's (1996) perspective, we understand that they can be much more nuanced than many would think. The fact that the 21st-century has presented us with monsters such as the vampires from *Twilight* reflects on how we see monsters, namely, as creatures who are not necessarily in a place to be feared, which suggests a view that what is different is no longer to be shunned, but rather accepted by what it is, or more easily embraced. Just as there are good and bad people, there are good and bad vampires, and they are to be judged based on the morality (or immorality) of their actions, not on their bodies, differences, or appearances.

Cohen (1996) proposes seven theses for the analysis of cultures based on the monsters they create. He starts with the first thesis, that the monster's body is a cultural body, that is, the monster is the embodiment of a specific cultural moment, making narrative flesh of the fears and desires of that culture. This fits very well with Palahniuk's monsters and stories. As Sondergard (2009) points out, "it's clear that [Palahniuk] consciously manipulates literature's potential for directing scrutiny to sociopolitical issues and the desirability of effecting social

change” (p. 14). Palahniuk’s writing is only possible in our late-stage capitalist society, especially since it criticizes this very society. The first pages of *Invisible Monsters* present Shannon remarking that “[n]ot that anybody in this big drama is a real alive person, either. You can trace everything about Evie Cottrell’s look back to some television commercial for an organic shampoo” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 11-12). In addition, the character/narrator states that

What I tell myself is the gush of red pumping out of Brandy’s bullet hole is less like blood than it’s some sociopolitical tool. The thing about being cloned from all those shampoo commercials, well, that goes for me and Brandy Alexander, too. Shotgunning anybody in this room would be the moral equivalent of killing a car, a vacuum cleaner, a Barbie doll. Erasing a computer disk. Burning a book. Probably that goes for killing anybody in the world. We’re all such products. (p. 12)

This makes clear the theme and tone of the story we are about to read. Even if the characters are at odds with cultural and societal norms, they are still projecting them. They are outcasts, living in the margins of capitalist society, but they still emulate their belonging to the patterns of our society. They are our (capitalist, heteronormative, patriarchal) society’s worst fear: that people will not conform to their prescribed role.

Indeed, they refuse their roles so much, that they do not even die when they should, because, as we see in Cohen’s (1996) second thesis, “the monster always escapes”. Shane was supposed to be dead of AIDS, but he comes back as Brandy.

My brother I hate is come back from the dead. Shane's being dead was just too good to be true. First the exploding hairspray can didn't kill him. Then our family couldn't just forget him. Now even the deadly AIDS virus has failed me. My brother is nothing but one bitter fucking disappointment after another. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 179)

Brandy is later shot in the chest and still survives. Shannon very nearly dies on the day she shot her own face and, according to the doctors who cared for her, she could still die at any moment, except she does not. At the end, Shannon has a metaphorical death, by giving her documents to Brandy, so that she can go on living as Shannon McFarland. But Shannon goes on to live a quiet, invisible life.

These characters’ refusal to take their prescribed places in society calls back to Cohen’s third thesis, the monster as a harbinger of category crisis. As Cohen puts it,

this refusal to participate in the classificatory “order of things” is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions. (1996, p. 6)

All the main characters fit into this description. Shannon mutilates herself in order to stop being beautiful permanently; Brandy and Evie are transgender women who aspire to have the beauty Shannon so desperately tries to get rid of; and Manus is a macho closeted gay man, who is being fed female hormones without his knowledge. All their bodies end up being transgressive, in that they are changing or changed from their expected state, i.e., the bodies they were born with.

Their transience between male and female, and beautiful and monstrous is a direct affront to what our society tends to expect. While we are expected to follow our roles in patriarchal bourgeois society, to grow up, get married, have children, collect wealth, and die (HALBERSTAM, 2005), the characters live at the margins of this society – more discussion on this topic in chapter 3.2. This, as Levina and Bui (2013) state, makes them monsters, because monstrosity is based on what our culture dictates that we repress, not necessarily to be civilized, but rather to fit in with these expectations of our capitalist patriarchal society. They call it “surplus repression”, which is what keeps us monogamous, heterosexual, and bourgeois, which is linked to the concept of the Other, but not as something from the outside that needs to be feared, but rather something from the inside, which must be repressed. This is an evolution of Freud’s ideas about our repression of sexual desires to fit into society, or “the return of the repressed”. What is repressed is, then, as Levina and Bui (2013) state, not coming from the outside, but from within ourselves and our society, but which we repress to the point of it becoming estranged, unfamiliar, uncanny.

Once someone becomes too different, they also become monstrous, as per Cohen’s (1996) fourth thesis: “the monster dwells at the gates of difference”.

The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond—of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within. Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual. (COHEN, 1996, p. 7)

Therefore, it is in our best interest to try and suppress these differences, to fit into society, which is precisely the opposite of what the characters in the novel do. They go towards what makes them unfit; they change their bodies to what they perceive to be unfitting forms, and live from stealing and selling drugs, thus making their monstrosity physical and moral.

We are afraid of going through what the characters go through, not because it is inherently bad, but rather because it is the opposite of what society imposes on us. This fear, as Halberstam (1995) states, is culturally and historically conditioned, and not some universal psychologically inherent trait. The transitional aspects of the monster, its cultural roots, are ultimately the factors that allow for so many monsters to exist, and to be so different from each other. But this fluidity also messes around on other categories, such as beauty, humanity and identity, which are still thought of as relatively stable.

The monster's transitional aspect is also important in Cohen's (1996) fifth thesis, "the monster polices the borders of the possible". The monster is the warning on the fence, "beware of immigrants", "attention! queers ahead", "caution! poverty area". When facing these monsters, they usually serve as a message that curiosity is not always a good thing. "The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself." (COHEN, 1996, p. 12) Considering this aspect, we can understand our characters as monstrous in two ways. Firstly, they are monstrous because they are transgenders, escaping the gender rules that society imposes on everyone. Looking from outside of the queer community, that is a very pervasive thought. People should accept whatever gender they were born with the *correct* biology for.

But there is a more interesting figuration of their monstrosity in this category, especially when we know what we know now, that Palahniuk himself is a member of the queer community. There is another border that our characters patrol, and that is of the hyperreality. As we will discuss further in chapter 3.1, Palahniuk writes his views on the current state of reality, or lack thereof. We see this especially in Shannon's telling of the story and in both Shannon and Brandy's rebellion against what is expected of them. Their motivations are precisely to escape the predictable, to find authenticity in themselves, which, as we see in the characters' and in Baudrillard's (1994) arguments, is impossible in our current society (this topic is further discussed in section 3.1). However, once we see this, we understand that these characters are much more monstrous because they will go through any means necessary to be

authentic, be that go through a “sexual reassignment surgery” (as it is referred to in the book, but now more commonly referred to as “gender-affirming surgery”) or shoot their own face off.

However, even while we feel appalled and repelled by their extreme actions, we are also attracted to them. That is why, as Cohen (1996) describes in his sixth thesis, the “fear of the monster is really a kind of desire”. While we look at Shannon and Brandy’s acts of violence against their own bodies as repulsive, we also yearn for their independence. “We distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair.” (COHEN, 1996, p. 17) Of course I do not want to shoot my own face off, but I do wish I could be free of society’s expectations on me and on what I do with my own life. Of course I do not wish to go through a major surgery that I neither need nor want, but I do wish I could be whoever I wanted and do whatever I wanted, as if writing my own story. Shannon and Brandy are there to let us know that these things are not achieved easily nor cheaply.

But while the monsters go through all of this to show us our limitations, our prejudices, our fears, they come back to us and make us think on why they were created. How is it that our culture is developing, as to allow for the creation of these monsters? That is what Cohen (1996) asks in his final thesis, “the monster stands at the threshold... of becoming”, because we must accept the monster as our own creation and understand how it was that it came to be.

As we use monsters as ways of dealing with our own prejudices and reevaluating our cultural assumptions, they become more and more intertwined with our culture and cultural production. Levina and Bui (2013) argue that monsters have become a necessary part of living in the 21st century, when read as responses to our rapidly changing culture.

2.1.2 Uncanny (or all that arouses dread and creeping horror)

Give me homesickness.

Flash.

Give me nostalgic childhood yearnings.

Flash.

(Chuck Palahniuk)

Taking a closer look at Shannon and Brandy’s relationship, and, to some extent, Shannon and Evie’s, we see that Brandy and Evie try to mimic Shannon to various degrees. While Brandy is literally trying to become Shannon in appearance through cosmetic surgeries,

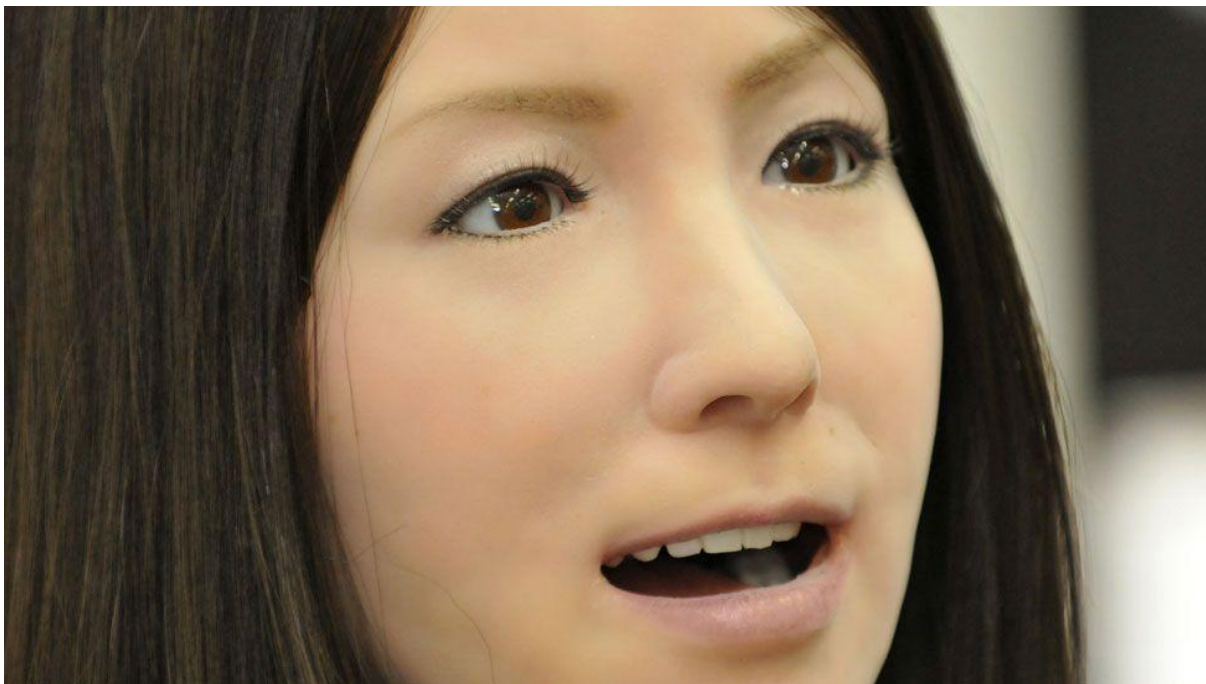
Evie tries to emulate Shannon by borrowing her clothes and trying to do the same things as her. However, Shannon sees that they can never quite become her, they are forever one step away, Brandy with her masculine hands, and Evie with her clothes size. These small points of difference in a sea of similarities are what make them uncanny.

We can understand Brandy and Evie as Shannon's doubles. The double is a concept proposed by Otto Rank, of a person who not only is physically very similar but might even share some sort of psychic link with another. Rank's ideas evoke mirrors, shadows, and spirits. Freud builds on top of this concept, arguing that it is not merely the idea of someone looking like someone else that brings terror, but rather something else, something more.

While there are many things that elicit in us a sense of fear, the uncanny is somewhat separate from it. It relates to things once very familiar that are now forgotten or repressed. The Uncanny is the familiar, but with a twist. As Freud (2018) puts it, "this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old – established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression" (p. 12-13). It might be a reflex of something that we repressed, or something that we thought to be only imaginary, but which is shown in real life.

Freud (2018) gives an example of Hoffmann's *The Sand-Man*, a story about a man who falls in love with an "automaton", which comes very close to what we, nowadays, would call a realistic robot. Those robots that seem human, but have that one creepy thing about them, that is hard to pinpoint or describe, but is clear to everyone who looks at them. They are similar to humans, they have eyes, nose, lips, ears, hair and even some synthetic skin-like material, like the one in Figure 1. Seeing them moving and trying to imitate human movements can feel even weirder than simply looking at a picture. With their human-like features, their unnatural movements are even more pronounced. It is the sensation of the familiar turned into something else that gives us that uncanny feeling.

Figure 1 – Uncanny robot



Source: BBC website⁴

The Uncanny can also be attained when we believe something to be imaginary, but it is materialized in reality. This is the uncanny of Brandy Alexander's beauty. Through her surgeries, she materializes the beauty ideal of magazines. This ideal is not meant to be achieved, but rather to be a perpetual target, just far enough that we will keep on trying to get to it. However, once Brandy reaches this level of beauty, coming close to what could be called perfection in terms of appearance, she crosses this line into the uncanny. Once she attains the *ideal* appearance, she becomes a simulacrum of beauty, her appearance no longer has any touching point with reality. Brandy's appearance is based on Shannon's but amplified by all of her plastic surgeries. Brandy becomes the very target that should be unreachable. She materializes that which should be abstract, becoming uncanny exactly because she is *too* beautiful.

The root of her uncanniness is also the root to her sublimity. As she reaches this extreme level of beauty, it could be said that she reaches perfection, but, as Burke (2009) states,

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20130901-is-the-uncanny-valley-real>, retrieved January 9, 2023.

perfection is not the cause of beauty. This idealized beauty perfection is meant to be an unreachable target, not an actual point you can reach. This beauty simulacrum is meant to be far from reality, something idealized to keep us buying beauty products and diets. Brandy is uncanny and sublime at the same time because both effects stem from the same aspect: her excessive beauty.

2.2 Beauty (or pure aesthetic content)

Give me attention.

Flash.

Give me beauty.

Flash.

Give me peace and happiness, a loving relationship, and a perfect home.

Flash.

(Chuck Palahniuk)

Discussing beauty is a complex matter, attempted by many philosophers throughout human history, who discussed at length what beauty is, especially when thinking about human beauty. Determining exactly what makes for a beautiful object is an entirely different endeavor, made much more complicated by the fact that each person's perception of beauty is different. "Beautiful" [...] is an adjective that we often employ to indicate something that we like. In this sense, it seems that what is beautiful is the same as what is good, and in fact in various historical periods there was a close link between the Beautiful and the Good" (ECO, 2004, p. 8). Since Burke's concept of the sublime is present here, it seems fit to mention his reading of beauty as well. Even if his ideas on it are now largely considered outdated, at the time he proposed them, they were a revolution to the time's accepted theories on beauty. He opposed the reigning ideas of perfection, symmetry, and fitness as determinants of beauty, highlighting several examples in which these concepts fit perfectly but do not make for beautiful things.

2.2.1 What is beauty?

Give me passion.

Flash.

Give me joy.

Flash.

Give me youth and energy and innocence and beauty.

Flash.

(Chuck Palahniuk)

Burke's (2009) arguments regarding beauty, especially when talking about feminine beauty, seem outdated to a contemporary reader. Yet, it is undeniable that many of the characteristics he brings up as pertinent to women's beauty are still very much relevant, even if not outright spoken about. He starts saying that there is no accounting to taste, but then tries to find universal experiences to base his discussions on. He goes on to discuss how proportion is not the cause of beauty in vegetables, animals, or humans. He also discards fitness and perfection as the main causes of beauty. He states that

[t]he true opposite to beauty is not disproportion or deformity, but *ugliness*; and as it proceeds from causes opposite to those of positive beauty, we cannot consider it until we come to treat of that. Between beauty and ugliness there is a sort of mediocrity, in which the assigned proportions are most commonly found, but this has no effect upon the passions. (BURKE, 2009, p. 208-209)

He argues that perfection is not a constituent cause of beauty. He highlights that it is commonly said that perfection is beauty but goes on to defend that it is in the imperfections that beauty is built. As per Burke's (2009) views, beauty is in smallness, smoothness, and delicacy. As Boulton discusses in the introduction to Burke's book, these are outdated views; Burke's most relevant discussion was the refusal of the ideas of the time, that beauty was in proportion, utility, and perfection. However, we still see, to this day, some of his ideas applied to women's beauty. Women *should* be, when compared to men, smaller and more delicate. When we think of the editing of women's pictures, in magazines and outdoors, the first thing done is to make women seem thinner, quickly followed by the smoothing of the skin, to get rid of any *imperfections*. This confusion between beauty and perfection has led us, as Baudrillard (2009) defends, towards a societal trend of erasing any *mistakes* or *imperfections*.

This inhuman formalization of face, speech, sex, body, will and public opinion is a tendency everywhere in evidence. Every last glimmer of fate and negativity has to be expunged in favour of something resembling the smile of a corpse in a funeral home, in favour of a general redemption of signs. To this end a gigantic campaign of plastic surgery has been undertaken. (BAUDRILLARD, 2009, p. 50-51)

This phenomenon, he states, leads us to a society where everything is whitewashed, where there should be no ugliness or violence. And that is what the characters in the novel are rebelling against, as discussed in chapter 4.

But if perfection is not beauty, how else can we describe it? Looking at it as a cognitive process, Couchot (2019) maintains that aesthetic pleasure is a reward for the brain for paying

attention to a specific target. Whether by decision of the individual or by the object's aspect, aesthetic attention provokes a pleasure on the looker. However, the same target might generate the inverse feeling of displeasure. "While pain is associated with negative emotions such as fear, sadness, disgust, whose combination commonly constitutes what is called suffering, pleasure is associated with multiple nuances of happiness, pride and positive background emotions⁵" (COUCHOT, 2019, p. 60, translation mine). Even if one would usually expect a representation of pleasure or beauty to cause a pleasurable feeling, sometimes art that portrays suffering, horror movies, or sad songs can, paradoxically, induce pleasurable feelings. That means beauty can be found in many ways, shapes, and forms, and it depends on the appreciation of the observer to be understood as beauty.

Following Couchot's (2019) arguments, while we are used to presuming that aesthetic appreciation is to be found exclusively in works of art, as if it were a rare and specific experience, it can actually be found in many different types of objects. Natural objects, such as flowers and animals, as well as industrial objects, such as an electrical tower or a plane, can also be the objects of aesthetic appreciation. We are constantly classifying things as beautiful or ugly, and we do this all the time. This reflects in our concepts of beauty and ugliness. As we experience things aesthetically, they compose our repertoires, developing our understanding of the world, which is shaped and molded by our experiences. "There is no doubt that it was necessary for man's environment to become increasingly artificial, technicized, and nature increasingly distant, for natural forms to stop being the reference of beauty⁶" (COUCHOT, 2019, p. 93, translation mine). This change contributed to a shift in the understanding of beauty, from the object to the observer, that is, to the representation of that object in the observer's mind.

When considering our perception of art, Couchot (2019) talks about Eco's ideas, that art is made between the predictable and unpredictable, order and chaos. A work of art must be open for interpretation, which depends on the observer's individual experiences and their cultural background. Provoking uncertainty is a way to incite the observer's attention. However, certain

⁵ *Enquanto a dor é associada a emoções negativas, como medo, tristeza, desgosto, cuja combinação comumente constitui o que se denomina sofrimento, o prazer está associado a múltiplas nuances de felicidade, orgulho e emoções de fundo positivas.*

⁶ *Não resta dúvida de que foi preciso que o ambiente do homem se tornasse cada vez mais artificial, tecnicizado, e a natureza cada vez mais distante, para que as formas naturais deixassem de ser a referência da beleza.*

shapes that are instantly recognizable can also captivate our aesthetic attention, usually the more curved or round ones.

Among these shapes, the face occupies a privileged place, as it is entirely full of curves. Quite characteristic of visual culture, at least until the advent of modern art, portrait art, for example, triggers cognitive recognition processes that are now well known⁷. (COUCHOT, 2019, p. 106, translation mine)

The implications of this idea specifically when thinking about Shannon's face are further discussed in chapter 4.1. We do recognize and appreciate a beautiful face, well reproduced, but we also see faces where there are none, in houses with symmetrical windows and one door in the center (Figure 2), or fruits arranged just so (Figure 3), as seen in the following pictures.

Figure 2 – House that looks like a face



Source: Huffpost⁸

⁷ *Dentre essas formas, o rosto ocupa um lugar privilegiado, pois é inteiramente cheio de curvas. Bastante característica da cultura visual, pelo menos até o advento da arte moderna, a arte do retrato, por exemplo, aciona processos cognitivos de reconhecimento que hoje são bem conhecidos.*

⁸ https://img.huffingtonpost.com/asset/5b9d1b57240000300094f155.jpeg?ops=scalefit_960_noupscale, retrieved January 6, 2023.

Figure 3 – Vertumnus, image of a human composed of vegetables



Source: Wikipedia⁹

Art is, therefore, not only Plato's imitation, be that imitation a direct representation of reality, or of a concept in the artist's mind, but rather, built on top of the distance between possibility and reality, as Aristotle suggests. If we can attribute human faces and emotions to fruits because of the way they are arranged, that is because we naturally build inside this space left by the distancing of representation and reality. Art is, in this sense, the first step of a Simulacrum, as proposed by Baudrillard (1994), and further discussed in chapter 3.1. It is that first distancing from reality that detaches our perception from what was originally there to begin with. Modern artists use this idea of dislocation to put industrial objects in places where their

⁹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vertumnus_\(painting\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vertumnus_(painting)), retrieved January 6, 2023.

functionality is stripped away, leaving their forms and functions to be observed and thought about outside of their everyday spaces, breaking our expectations about their expected use (COUCHOT, 2019). Duchamp's *Fountain* (Figure 4) is very unlikely to be considered beautiful, but it is, without a doubt, art, because it engages our aesthetic attention, inducing some sort of feeling when we consider it as a urinal outside of its expected place.

Figure 4 – Duchamp's *Fountain*



Source: Wikipedia, photograph by Alfred Stieglitz¹⁰

¹⁰ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fountain_\(Duchamp\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fountain_(Duchamp)), retrieved January 6, 2023.

As Couchot (2019) concludes, humans have evolved to pay attention to the world around us, not as a cultural process, but as an evolutionary one. The aesthetic attention is a first-class necessity, even if we do not yet fully understand the cognitive processes that are involved in it. We see that when we think of the evolution of beauty from exclusively an artistic endeavor, to a more commercialized one. For centuries, the notion of beauty was focused on art and artistic objects, but it has now evolved to contemplate everyday objects, as well as artistic installations and experiences. Whichever form beauty takes, the aesthetic attention we disperse towards it is an individual choice. Aesthetic pleasure is a sort of reward to the brain, for directing its attention to an aesthetically pleasing object.

Considering the sheer number of different types of art, objects and people that can be described as beautiful, we see the difficulty in finding specific aspects that constitute beauty. Discussing the concept of beauty is not the aim of this thesis, though; for this discussion, the most important part is to understand that beauty is different when dealing with art and fashion. As Eco (2004) explains, what we expect of beauty in art is different from what we expect of beauty in fashion. They fulfill different expectations and roles in our society.

2.2.2 Beauty in art

*Give me attention.
Flash.
Give me adoration.
Flash.
Give me a break.*

(Chuck Palahniuk)

In *On Beauty*, Eco (2004) analyzes the evolution of beauty through art, which, as he puts it, is the most reliable way of understanding a culture's concept of beauty. However,

[...] the close relationship forged by the modern age between Beauty and Art is not as obvious as we think. While certain modern aesthetic theories have recognised only the Beauty of art, thus underestimating the Beauty of nature, in other historical periods the reverse was the case: Beauty was a quality that could be possessed by natural things (such as moonlight, a fine fruit, a beautiful colour), while the task of art was solely to do the things it did *well*, in such a way that they might serve the purpose for which they were intended—to such an extent that art was a term applied even-handedly to the work of painters, sculptors, boat builders, carpenters and barbers alike. Only much later, in order to distinguish painting, sculpture and architecture from what

we would now call crafts, did we conceive of the notion of Fine Arts. (ECO, 2004, p. 10)

As Eco (2004) continues arguing, even once beauty and art became more closely linked, this relationship was sometimes a little twisted, for example, when a dangerous natural event, such as a volcanic eruption, was portrayed beautifully. This portrayal can be beautiful, even if the event itself is not.

Eco (2004) analyzes works of art, beginning with artifacts from Ancient Greece, and arriving at contemporary art, in order to discuss how beauty evolved during this time and in different places as well. He starts by looking at what these cultures considered to be beautiful in order to think about beauty and its roots and developments. Through this process, he looks not only at physical beauty, in the representation of women, men and nature, but also at representations of gods, saints and ideas. He also ponders about ugliness and its representation in art, even if that is not the focus of this particular book¹¹. Through art, it is possible, the author suggests, to portray beautifully something ugly.

If we go no further than these reflections, the question is simple: the Ugliness that repels us in nature exists, but it becomes acceptable and even pleasurable in the art that expresses and shows 'beautifully' the ugliness of Ugliness. But up to what point does a beautiful representation of Ugliness (or of monstrosity) lend it some degree of fascination? (ECO, 2004, p. 133)

That is possible because art is a mirror of reality, but not an exact imitation. It is a representation created through the point of view of the artist and appreciated through the point of view of the observer. The subjective ideas on beauty of both author and observer are projected into the piece of art.

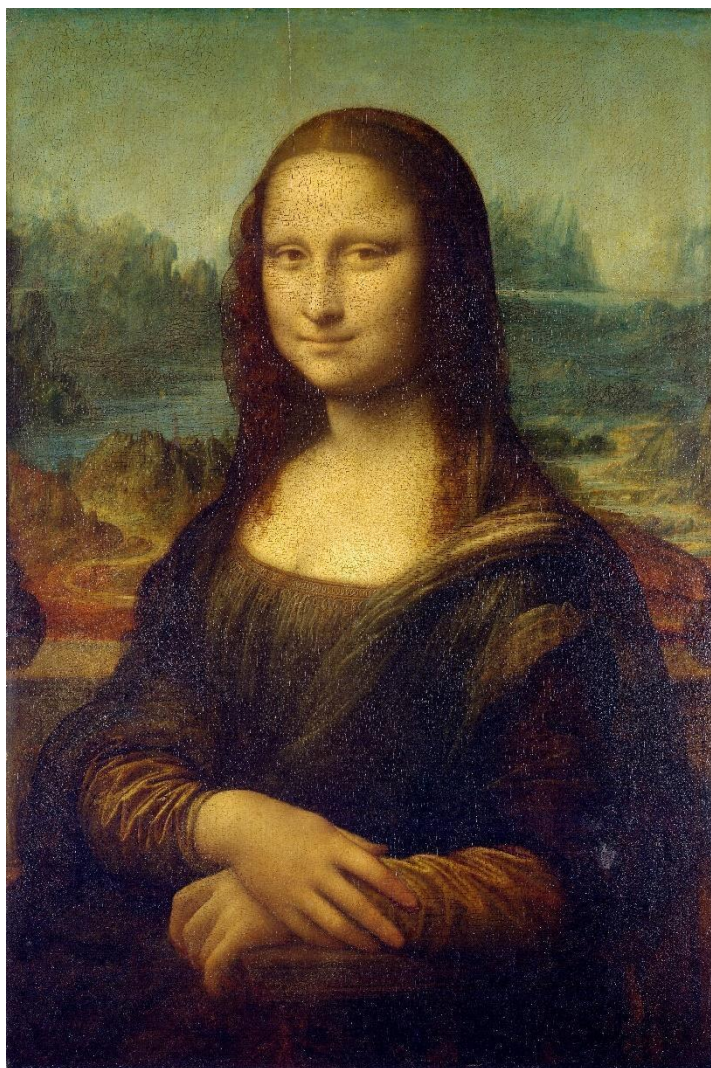
The fact remains that, in considering an object to be beautiful, we hold that our judgement must have a universal value and that everyone must (or ought to) share our judgement. But, since the universality of judgements of taste does not require the existence of a concept to be conformed with, the universality of Beauty is subjective: it is a legitimate claim on the part of those who express the judgement, but in no way can it assume universal value in cognitive terms. (ECO, 2004, p. 264)

¹¹ He did, however, write a book specifically about ugliness, as a companion to this, called *On Ugliness*.

Around the seventeenth century, Eco (2004) says, there was a split between two aspects of aesthetic pleasure, beauty, and the sublime. They were split in two, even if many characteristics were shared between both parts. Around that time, there was a rise in popularity of the Gothic novel, with its haunted mansions, ghosts, and gloomy atmosphere. Many questioned how horror could give us pleasure when, up until very recently, the reigning idea was that pleasure and delight were associated with experiencing beauty. It is in that context that Burke (2009) writes, defining the sublime experience and opposing it to beauty. His views on the sublime will be further discussed in chapter 2.3.

To contextualize the subject a bit, we can use works of art. When prompted to picture art, most of us think about paintings, such as da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (Figure 5), Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (Figure 6), or Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* (Figure 7). We judge these works of art as beautiful because of their masterful representation of natural beauty, which, as Eco (2004) says, was the preferred artistic object for some time. A beautiful work of art was one that portrayed nature beautifully.

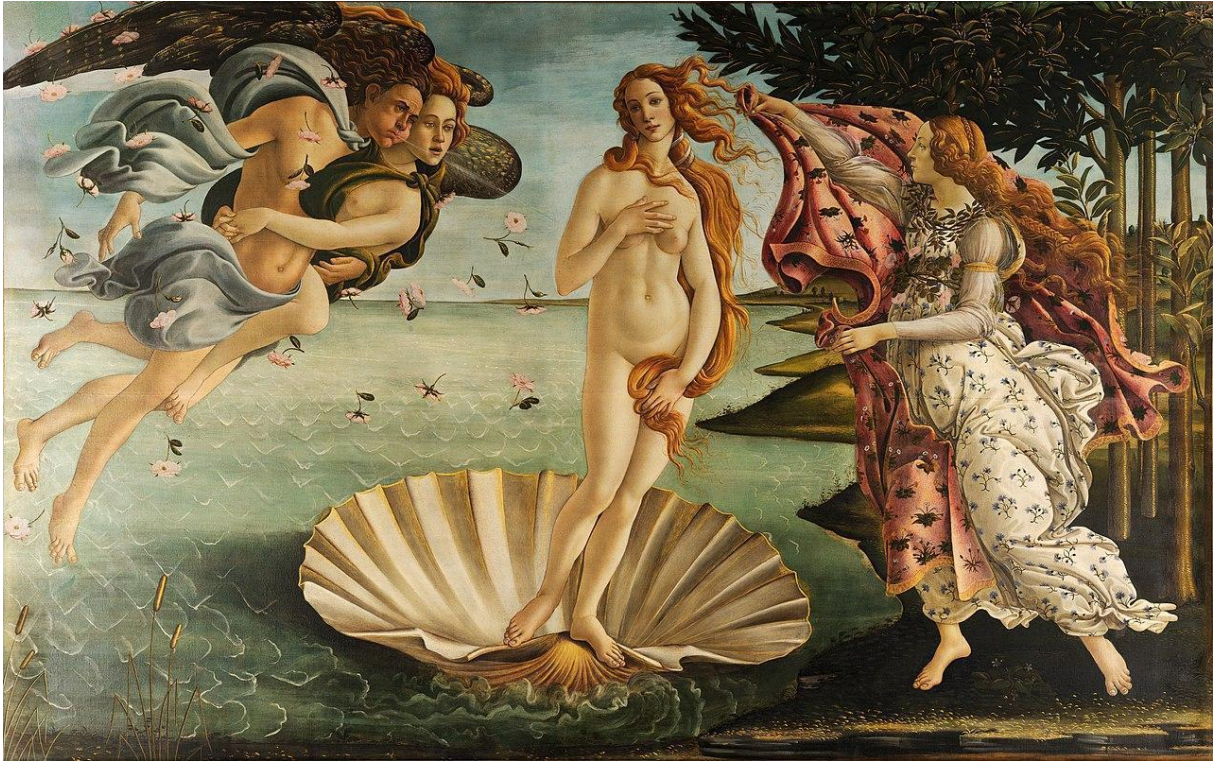
Figure 5 – da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*



Source: Wikipedia¹²

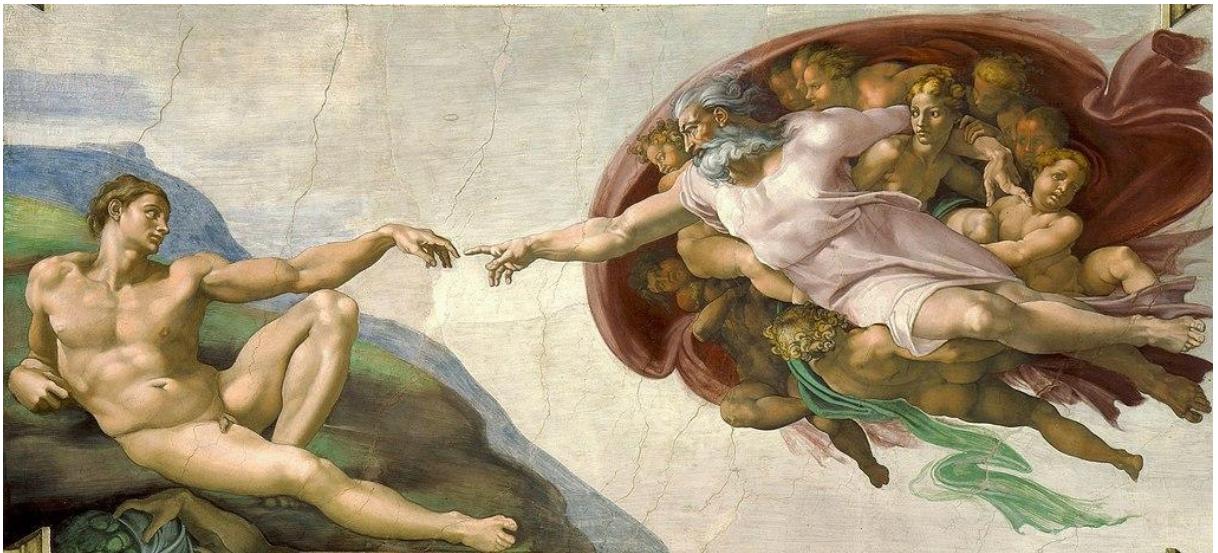
¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mona_Lisa, retrieved January 6, 2023.

Figure 6 – Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*



Source: Wikipedia¹³

Figure 7 – Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*



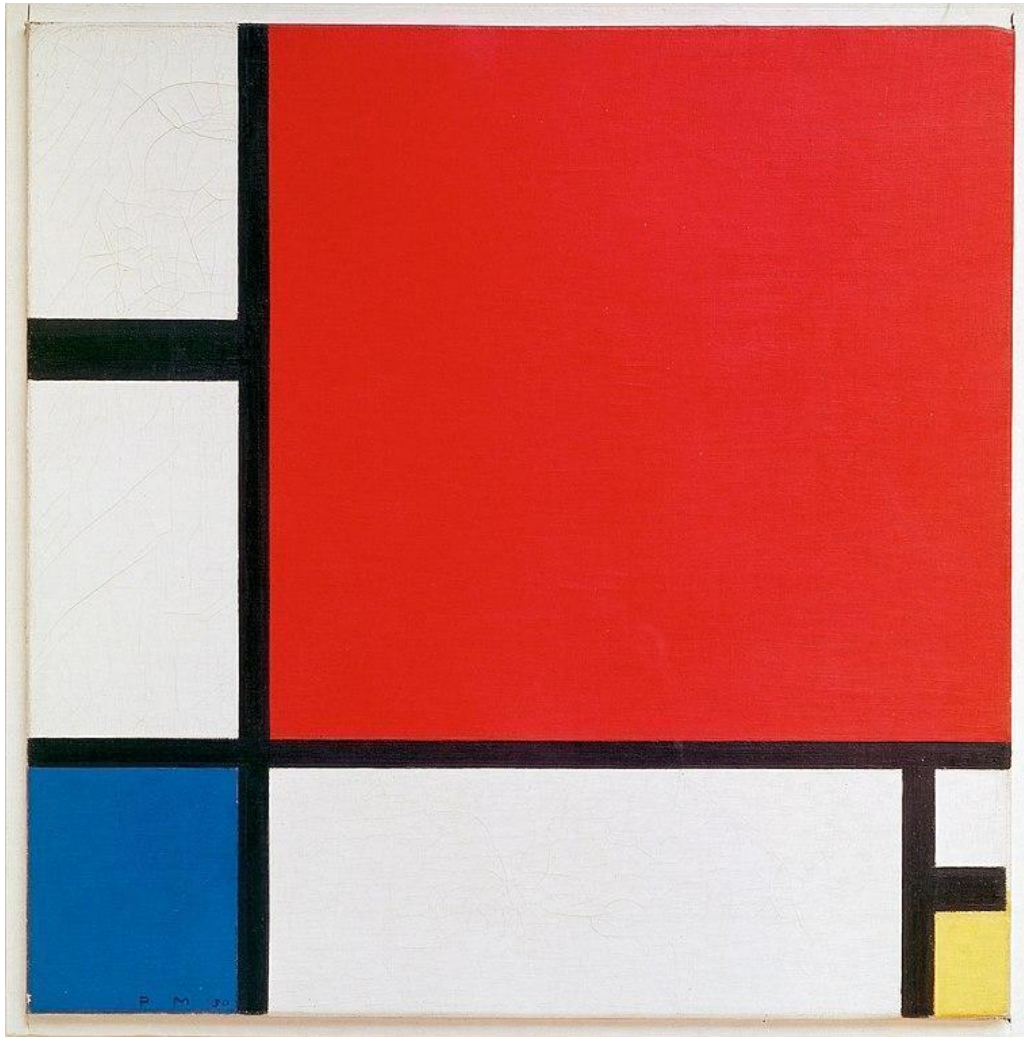
Source: Wikipedia¹⁴

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Birth_of_Venus, retrieved January 6, 2023.

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Creation_of_Adam, retrieved January 6, 2023.

These ideas of beauty have, however, evolved with time, as we discussed in the previous section, especially with the industrialization of our surroundings. Is Duchamp's *Fountain* (Figure 4) beautiful? What about Mondrian's *Composition II in Red, Blue, and Yellow* (Figure 8)? And Picasso's *Guernica* (Figure 9)?

Figure 8 – Mondrian's *Composition II in Red, Blue, and Yellow*



Source: Wikipedia¹⁵

¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Composition_with_Red_Blue_and_Yellow, retrieved January 6, 2023.

Figure 9 – Picasso’s *Guernica*



Source: Britannica¹⁶

They are not what most people would call beautiful, and, yet, they are, undeniably, art. Eco (2004) says that modern art subscribes to the model of beauty of provocation. This idea of beauty comes from the avant-garde art movements because they fought against all the artistic canons that existed before them. “Art is no longer interested in providing an image of natural Beauty, nor does it aim to procure the pleasure ensuing from the contemplation of harmonious forms. On the contrary, its aim is to teach us to interpret the world through different eyes.” (ECO, 2004, p. 415) Eco (2004) goes on, saying that most avant-garde movements arose in opposition to the mass production of objects. Every object is now a “good” to be sold and to generate profit, with progressively less value of use. Its value is now in its reproducibility and widely spread acceptability to different tastes. An object’s beauty is no longer in its features specifically, but rather in its practicality and popularity.

[I]t was practicality that determined the popularity of an object, and practicality and popularity grew in direct proportion to the quantity of objects produced from the basic model. In other words, objects lost the ‘aura’ conferred upon them by certain singular features that determined their Beauty and importance. The new Beauty could be reproduced, but it was also transitory and perishable: it had to persuade the consumer of the need for rapid replacement, either out of wear and tear or disaffection, so that

¹⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Guernica-by-Picasso>, retrieved January 6, 2023.

there might be no cessation of the exponential growth of the circuit involving the production, distribution and consumption of goods. (ECO, 2004, p. 376-377)

However, as Eco (2004) points out, even those who take part in the avant-garde art world, still mostly look like other people, wearing jeans and designer clothes, and trying to mimic the beauty sold by mass media. “These people follow the ideals of Beauty as suggested by the world of commercial consumption, the very world that avant-garde artists have been battling against for over fifty years” (ECO, 2004, p. 418). This contrast, according to the author, is typical of the twentieth century, offering for consumption whichever pattern of beauty will generate money. “For their part, the mass media no longer present any unified model, any single ideal of Beauty” (ECO, 2004, p. 426). But while the author states that we live in a culture of tolerance and syncretism, with a polytheism of beauty, it can still be argued that, when thinking about fashion and especially women’s bodies, there are still many rules that society expects to be followed. They can be different, based on gender, social class, cultural norms, or social groups, but they are still reigning above us all, demanding to be met.

2.2.3 Beauty in fashion

*The photographer in my head says:
Give me a voice.
Flash.
Give me a face.*

(Chuck Palahniuk)

Just as our representations of monstrosity change with our society, so do our concepts of beauty. “The qualities that a given period calls beautiful in women are merely symbols of the female behavior that that period considers desirable” (WOLF, 2002, p. 13). Just like monstrosity represents a culture’s fears, beauty represents a culture’s aim. But that aim is meant to be unreachable and to pit women against each other (WOLF, 2002). Back when food was scarce and only rich people had access to nutritious food, beautiful women were represented as having a little (or a lot) of fat to burn. We can see that in the famous Venus Figurine, most famously, the Venus of Willendorf (Figure 10), a small statue of a woman, estimated to be around 25.000 years old. That statue was carved during the Paleolithic era, when humans were still hunter-gatherers, which meant food was usually scarce.

Figure 10 – Venus Figurine



Source: Wikipedia¹⁷

In contrast, nowadays, when the most accessible foods are the ultra-processed ones, full of calories, the model of beautiful women is skinny or fit. We see that the people who we are supposed to aspire to look like are the super-rich ones, who not only have the money to buy good food, but also have people who say what they should eat and other people who cook for them. Gisele Bündchen, for example, stated several times that she had a personal chef, as do the Kardashians. These people also spend a lot of time exercising. Not only do they have the money to pay for good, expensive food and exercise, but also the time to exercise every day. Keeping their bodies near the beauty standard is their full-time job. And if even these people, who revolve their whole lives to being fit, still use lots of makeup, Instagram filters and edit their photos, what kind of standard of beauty are we setting up? So, how is it that ordinary

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venus_figurine, retrieved April 13, 2023.

people should keep up with these examples? As this discussion progresses, we will see that we are not meant to.

Everyone *should*, however, aspire to be as thin as Gisele Bündchen, or, alternatively, to have Kim Kardashian's curves, and, indeed, there are a lot of people who try to. There are so many girls trying to make it big in the fashion world, all of them thin and beautiful. Still, we see many more cases of failure than of success, so much so that it is nearly impossible to pinpoint why one person makes it big, when there are countless others that look just like them that can barely make ends meet (MEARS, 2011).

Success in markets such as fashion modeling might on the surface appear to be a matter of blind luck or pure genius. But luck is never blind, nor does genius work alone. Behind every winner in a winner-take-all market such as fashion modeling is a complex, organized production process. The secrets to success have much less to do with the models themselves than with the social context of an unstable market. There is little intrinsic value in a model's physique that would set her apart from any number of other similarly built teens. When dealing with aesthetic goods such as 'beauty' and 'fashionability,' we would be hard-pressed to identify objective measures of worth inherent in the good itself. Rather, an invisible social world is hard at work behind the scenes of fashion to bequeath cultural value onto looks. (MEARS, 2011, p. 4-5)

When we look at a model, there are several actors behind the scenes that are much more determinant to that person's success than her own beauty. Mears (2011) goes on to explain that the social aspects are determinant to beauty and fashion ideals, since these are cultural constructs, therefore, determined by cultural consumption.

[...] models conform to basic Western standards of attractiveness, for instance, youthfulness, clear skin, healthy teeth, and symmetrical features. Within this frame, they adhere to narrow height and weight specifications. The female model is typically at least 5'9" with body measurements close to a 34" bust, a 24" waist, and 34" hips. The male model is typically 6' to 6'3" with a 32" waist and a 39" to 40" chest. (MEARS, 2011, p. 6)

In the metric standard, these measurements would be around 175 cm height, 86 cm bust and hips and 60 cm waist. For men, that would be around 182 to 190 cm height, 81 cm waist and 100 cm chest.

When looking at a pool of dozens of people who all look like they were made from the same factory mold, fashion models are chosen based not on their beauty, but rather on their *look*. "A look is decidedly not the equivalent of beauty or sexual attractiveness. While bookers and clients talk about some looks as 'beautiful' and 'gorgeous', they are just as likely to value

others they describe as ‘strange’, ‘grungy’, and ‘almost ugly’” (MEARS, 2011, p. 6). The *look* is often described by people in the industry as “something else”, which is linked to the person’s personality and reputation. Mears (2011, p. 6) goes on to state that, “in an industry predicated on appearances, personality is a surprisingly important factor for success”. However, both beauty and the *look* are cultural constructs. “They are pure aesthetic content and are subject to wild, rapid fluctuations in value” (MEARS, 2011, p. 6), leaving workers of this field in a remarkably precarious position of not knowing what their next paycheck will look like.

While, as Mears (2011) puts it, fashion models work on a freelance-style market, similar to day laborers, both of which require few skills and no formal education, modeling is still considered a prestigious career. Even if the odds of getting recognized and well-paid are low, modeling remains an ambition for many people, especially for women. This prestige comes from the pressure by society to conform to the standards portrayed by these women.

Models do much more than promote the sale of fashion. The model look promotes and disseminates ideas about how women and men should look. Fashion images are prescriptions for masculinity and femininity. Gender, we know, is a matter of active ‘doing,’ not mere passive being, so modeling can be thought of as the professionalization of a certain type of gender performance, one that interlocks with race, sexuality, class, and other social positions. (MEARS, 2011, p. 16)

In that sense, as Mears (2011) continues, the ideals portrayed by models enforce the commodification of women’s bodies as something to be bought, maintaining women under the capitalist, patriarchal society. These ideals come from “social structural patterns of inequality that constrain individual action. Cultural ideals of feminine and masculine difference along race and class lines limit the field of possibilities of the look” (MEARS, 2011, p. 171). There are so many other people involved in the making of a successful model that it makes it hard, if not impossible, to enact changes on a personal level. When people inside the industry are faced with these problems, even if they have sympathy for the cause, they still need to make money, relying on conventions and stereotypes when making decisions. As shown by Mears (2011), they must make choices based on what they believe consumers want.

There are few examples of people with enough power to, alone, create something that defies the standard and have critical and commercial success. One recent and well-known case is Rihanna’s Savage X Fenty brand, a lingerie brand, focused on inclusivity for body types, genders and skin colors. The brand uses models of different skin colors and body types to show the products, as seen below in Figure 11, and focuses on women empowerment to feel good

and sexy in their own bodies. Even with Savage X Fenty's success, other big lingerie brands are still very slow to the diversification of bodies in their advertisements (CAT-WELLS, 2021; MCKINNON, 2022; VAN ELVEN, 2019).

Figure 11 – Rihanna's Savage X Fenty promotional material



Source: Women's Wear Daily website¹⁸

This lack of change, even in the face of a successful story, points towards patriarchal, capitalist society's pressure to conform to its oppressive beauty standards. Fashion models, as Mears (2011) states, perform gender as an idealization of the feminine body, maintaining the gap between the unachievable ideal and reality, generating a perpetual desire to conform, therefore, to buy; to waste time and energy in looking like them, therefore, having less time to rebel against society's oppression.

Looking at women's liberation through the years, we now have more power and money than ever before. However, as Wolf (2002) points out, physically we might be worse off than

¹⁸ <https://wwd.com/fashion-news/intimates/rihannas-savage-x-fenty-expansion-at-icr-1235029439/>, retrieved January 6, 2023.

the previous generations of women. She understands beauty as a currency, used to maintain male dominance over society.

Does all this mean we can't wear lipstick without feeling guilty?

On the contrary. It means we have to separate from the myth what it has surrounded and held hostage: female sexuality, bonding among women, visual enjoyment, sensual pleasure in fabrics and shapes and colors – female fun, clean and dirty. We can dissolve the myth and survive it with sex, love, attraction, and style not only intact, but flourishing more vibrantly than before. I am not attacking anything that makes women feel good; only what makes us feel bad in the first place. We all like to be desirable and feel beautiful. (WOLF, 2002, p. 271)

Understanding that the search for perfection is a way of keeping women under control is the first step towards that liberation, of feeling beautiful being the way we actually are, rather than associating beauty to standards that, by design, are not reachable. We are not meant to look like Gisele Bündchen does in a photoshoot for Vogue (Figure 12), because Gisele herself does not look like that in real life (Figure 13). Even if she still looks absolutely gorgeous, not even she can compare to herself in a heavily prepared and altered picture.

Figure 12 – Gisele Bündchen's Vogue photoshoot



Source: Vogue website, photograph by Inez and Vinoodh¹⁹

¹⁹ <https://www.vogue.com/slideshow/gisele-bundchen-vogue-cover-photos-inez-vinoodh-july-2018>, retrieved January 6, 2023.

Figure 13 – Gisele Bündchen’s spontaneous photo



Source: Pinterest²⁰

²⁰ <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/gisele-bndchen-is-awesome-without-makeup-we-all-look-this-great-without-makeup--519743613238032485/>, retrieved January 6, 2023.

2.3 Sublime (or the state of the soul)

Give me wonder, baby.

Flash.

Give me amazement.

Flash.

(Chuck Palahniuk)

While beauty tends to be seen as a positive experience, the sublime, despite its positive outcome, stems from a negative emotion. Whatever causes us terror can be a source of the sublime, if experienced from a distance. “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we everyday experience.” (BURKE, 2009, Part I, Section VII) There are different aspects of terror that can bring us to a sublime experience, but they are usually connected to our fear of death.

Therefore, while beauty, for Burke (2009), comes from things that are small, smooth, and attractive, the sublime comes from things that are vast, threatening and even dangerous, to an extent. Those beautiful things produce pleasure, but the sublime terrifies us, overwhelming our senses. However, as the philosopher explains, this feeling can only exist if the danger is seen from a distance, if the threat is far away enough so that it does not directly threaten our life. He differentiates the emotions of beauty and of the sublime, the first generating an experience of pleasure, while the second creates delight. The author differentiates three states of mind: *indifference*, *pleasure*, and *pain*. To experience pleasure, one can start from a point of indifference, and be entertained by music, or smell a perfume. That does not require passing through a state of pain, nor will it necessarily generate pain once the experience is over. The same can be said of the experience of pain. From a state of indifference, one might get hurt, or suddenly smell something foul. That experience does not pass through pleasure.

We shall venture to propose, that pain and pleasure are not only, not necessarily dependent for their existence on their mutual diminution or removal, but that, in reality, the diminution or ceasing of pleasure does not operate like positive pain; and that the removal of diminution of pain, in its effect has very little resemblance to positive pleasure. (BURKE, 2009 Part I, Section III)

As Burke (2009) goes on describing, even after a great terror, such as a violent storm, after the experience is over and the winds have stopped blowing, the feelings that it caused eventually mellow down, and we are returned to a state of indifference.

But shall we therefore say, that the removal of pain or its diminution is always simply painful? or affirm that the cessation or the lessening of pleasure is always attended itself with a pleasure? by no means. What I advance is no more than this; first, that there are pleasures and pains of a positive and independent nature; and secondly, that the feeling which results from the ceasing or diminution of pain does not bear a sufficient resemblance to positive pleasure to have it considered as of the same nature, or to entitle it to be known by the same name; and thirdly, that upon the same principle the removal or qualification of pleasure has no resemblance to positive pain. (BURKE, 2009, Part I, Section IV)

Burke (2009) calls the positive feeling, of diminishing or removing pain, *delight*, as opposed to *pleasure*. On the other hand, he proposes three possibilities for when pleasure ends: we could return to *indifference*, if the pleasure continued for the proper amount of time expected; if the pleasure is suddenly cut off, we experience *disappointment*; and if the source of pleasure is completely gone, with no chance of us experiencing it again, we experience *grief*. But neither of these feelings create pain. Most of the ideas powerful enough to create pain and pleasure are linked to self-preservation.

The ideas of *pain*, *sickness*, and *death*, fill the mind with strong emotions of horror; but *life* and *health*, though they put us in a capacity of being affected with pleasure, they make no such impression by the simple enjoyment. The passions therefore which are conversant about the preservation of the individual, turn chiefly on *pain* and *danger*, and they are the most powerful of all the passions. (BURKE, 2009, Part I, Section VI)

Objects that incite ideas of pain or danger are sources of the *sublime*. These ideas that create terror are the ones that create the strongest emotions that anyone is capable of feeling (BURKE, 2009). They must be, however, experienced with some distance in order to generate delight, otherwise they only generate terror. The most common way of experiencing the sublime is, then, by proxy. We will probably be terrified of a natural catastrophe that ruins our entire city, but we could be delighted by a work of fiction describing such an event.

An event such as a natural catastrophe or the contemplation of the sea or of a mountain are natural sources of the sublime, that is, sources found in nature. Those are usually sublime in their sheer size. Those sources of the sublime, if in their most powerful state, cause *astonishment*, “that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree

of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it” (BURKE, 2009, Part II, Section I). When in less intense force, the sublime can also cause admiration, reverence, and respect.

One of the most effective emotions in stripping us of our power to act and think is fear, because it stems from the idea of pain or death, therefore coming close to actual pain (BURKE, 2009). Whatever is terrible to see is a source of the sublime, be it vast or not. The source of the sublime in this case is the contemplation of danger. But to make something even more terrible, obscurity seems to help (BURKE, 2009). Not being able to fully grasp what it is we are looking at can make it much more terrifying. That is one of the main sources of terror in H. P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu, as it looks like nothing we know, being described as vaguely human-like, but with octopus and dragon features. The fact that the characters in Lovecraft’s stories not only do not know what it is but can barely understand its appearance causes so much terror that a mere glimpse of Cthulhu is enough to drive one mad. Understanding something terrible usually makes it less terrible, because our imagination has less space to act (BURKE, 2009), which leads us to another type of experience that Burke (2009) defends can be sublime: absolute privation. Absolute darkness, absolute solitude, absolute silence. They are all situations in which our minds are left to wonder about what *could* be there, lurking right on the edge of our perception.

Another source of the sublime that Burke (2009) discusses is power. It is not simply any type of power that is sublime, but rather the idea of a power so vast, so great, as to be able to cause real harm without much exertion. The idea of such a power is so far removed from anything natural, that it creates terror. That is the sublime of the wrath of God, capable of causing pain or death to anyone who opposes His will. Indeed, vastness of size is also a powerful source of the sublime: being at the foot of a steep mountain, in the middle of the ocean or on top of a waterfall. Another situation similar to this is in quantity or repetition. All of those things that, when compared to our own size, seem too much - which leads us to another source of the sublime pointed by Burke (2009), infinity. Our brains are not made to comprehend the concept of infinity, which makes contemplating it a truly sublime experience. These aspects, especially of size, can be borrowed from nature, and used by humans to create sublime experiences. For example, the gothic cathedral is a type of building designed to use its size to create a sublime experience. When looking at the Cologne cathedral (Figure 14), for example, one can only

imagine how people would have felt going to church in it in the Middle Ages, since, to this day, it towers over the nearby buildings.

Figure 14 – Cologne cathedral



Source: Wikipedia²¹

²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cologne_Cathedral, retrieved January 6, 2023.

Eco (2004) also writes about the sublime in his book about beauty. He brings examples of Caspar David Friedrich's art as representations of the sublime. As an example, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (Figure 15), Friedrich's most famous painting, presents a classic concept used by Friedrich, a figure with its back turned to the viewer – the famous *Rückenfigur*.

Figure 15 – Friedrich's *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*



Source: Wikipedia²²

²² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wanderer_above_the_Sea_of_Fog, retrieved April 13, 2023.

However, as Puschak (2022) points out, most of his paintings use tiny human figures as a representation of our size when compared to nature's presence. "Friedrich's landscapes are realistically rendered, but the landscape is not the subject of these canvases. The subject is the feeling he has in the presence of the landscape, the staggering encounter with the divinity he sees on it." (PUSCHAK, 2022, 00:01:46-00:01:59) And one of the ways he finds to do this is to show us just how small we are in comparison to nature, as shown in *The Monk by the Sea* (Figure 16).

Figure 16 – Friedrich's *The Monk by the Sea*



Source: Wikipedia²³

"In his landscapes, Friedrich is trying to paint that moment when the sublime in nature stirs the sublime in us." (PUSCHAK, 2022, 00:03:02-00:03:10) And, as Burke (2009) discussed, the sublime comes not from beauty, but rather, from the realization that there is something much greater than you, either in size or in sheer power. "In Friedrich's stark landscapes, man, so small against the world, is not in control. At all." (PUSCHAK, 2022,

²³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Monk_by_the_Sea, retrieved April 13, 2023.

00:05:12-00:05:20) It is in the awe-inspiring nature that German Romanticism found its source of sublime, since they were not interested in religion. Lacking the power of God, it is in nature that people found the sublime.

As religious transcendence becomes more distant from people's lives, we turn elsewhere for it. Literature and cinema are common sources of the sublime, with their representations of horrors that we could scarcely imagine before seeing realized on screen. Since it is not me who is at risk of being killed by *Halloween*'s Michael Myers or The Tethered in *Us*, the closeness to death brought by movies is only as close as our identification with the characters who are experiencing the events. Compared to the feeling a religious person reaches from watching a sermon about God's love, ire, and power inside of a cathedral, designed to make one feel tiny and powerless, watching a movie is considerably less overpowering. That is not to say there is no transcendence to be experienced in movies or literature, but, as Burke (2009) explains it, the sublime is an experience of overpowering our senses. Such an experience can be had with our vision and hearing in a dark movie theater, for example, but, in the sermon example above, it would also involve smelling the wood of the benches and the incense. It also involves our taste, once we take communion, and tact by going through the motions of rising, sitting, and kneeling. That is not to say that a sublime feeling cannot be reached through other rituals, which encompass fewer senses, but it is harder to do so, and it will generate a less intense experience, since it will not overwhelm our senses in the same manner.

Videogames are today one of the most prolific sources of the sublime, with notorious sublime titles such as *Outer Wilds*, *Proteus*, and *Minecraft*. Research on this topic is extensive (BETTS, 2014; KIM, 2022; O'BRIEN, 2012; POREMBA, 2013; SHINKLE, 2012; SPOKES, 2020) and focuses on the blurring between the game experience and the self. The sense of immersion in the story is one of the key points to experiencing the sublime in video games (KIM, 2022). This is achieved in part by the technological aspects of the games, but also by the interactivity aspect. The world representation being realistic enough to make us forget that we are *just* playing a game makes the experience immersive but having control over a character's actions puts us closer to the story than simply watching their actions unfold, as in a movie or book. This blurring of the lines between self and character is one of the central foundations of the sublime in games. This also happens in *Invisible Monsters* when Shannon looks at Brandy and sees herself. Brandy being a physical copy of Shannon is one of the aspects that creates in her and in Manus the sublime feeling when looking at Brandy.

The sublime in Palahniuk's writing has already been established, especially by Slade (2009; 2013). He defends that the sublime in *Invisible Monsters* can be found in the use of body mutilation, as well as in their pursuit of authenticity. In chapter 4, however, I argue that there is another aspect of the sublime, which lies in Brady's extreme beauty. According to Burke (2009), "whatever is qualified to cause terror, is a foundation capable of the sublime; to which I add, that not only these, but many things from which we cannot probably apprehend any danger have a similar effect, because they operate in a similar manner" (p. 229). Experiences that produce tension can also induce the sublime, even if not posing direct risk of death to the observer. These experiences can be the vastness of an ocean, or the power of a god.

Following Burke's (2009) theory, we can understand that someone who is considered sufficiently beautiful to resemble an image of a goddess can induce a sublime experience. When Shannon refers to Brandy as "thin and eternal goddess that she is" (PALAHNIUK 1999, p. 61) when describing her first meeting with Brandy, we can see how Shannon experienced the sublime when seeing Brandy for the first time. This is also true for Manus' experience, signaled when he says, "The Princess B. A. is God" (p. 83). Even more meaningful is that he says this while Shannon is observing "the wonders of nature" around them. Further confirmation that Brandy's beauty is considered a god-like sublime feature is the fact that Shannon says twice, once referring to Manus while they were dating, and once when talking about Brandy, that "beauty is power the way money is power the way a loaded gun is power" (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 229). If her beauty brings her power, and if Brandy is the most beautiful that our surgeries can make a woman, then her extreme beauty brings her such a power as to put her in a god-like status, giving anyone who is around her a sublime experience.

It might be argued that one thing cannot generate pleasure and delight at the same time, since beauty and the sublime are intrinsically different, stemming one from a good feeling and the other from a bad feeling. Indeed, Bellas (2022) does make the argument that, since beauty is rooted in harmony and proportions, while the sublime is rooted in vastness and obscurity, they are not compatible to be present in the same object. Here, however, I must disagree. When Burke (2009) talked about these topics, in the 18th century, society's view on beauty was a lot different from ours today. As Burke (2009) states, and Bellas (2022) concurs, beauty is in harmony and proportion, however, as we look at beauty now, with Eco's (2004) reading on beauty in art as beauty of provocation and beauty in fashion as beauty of consumption, we see beauty has changed. Indeed, as further discussed in the next chapter, applying Baudrillard's

(1994) theories of hyperreality to beauty, we understand that our concept of beauty is already out of touch with reality. With the normalization of airbrushed and retouched people on advertisements, and filters in social media, as well as makeup, the expectation that some people have of reaching that level of beauty is unattainable.

To keep with the same example I brought before, imagine meeting Gisele Bündchen on the street. That would likely already be a surreal experience, being that she is absurdly famous. Now imagine if she looked in real life exactly as she looks in the commercials she appears in: not a single hair out of place, perfect skin, perfect clothes. Imagine your shock and awe. And that description is really what brings beauty and the sublime together: perfection. When Burke wrote his theories, perfection might not have been the source of beauty, but today, with our technology, we can reach levels of perfection that Burke could scarcely imagine. Yet, we can still only reach them in virtual settings. However, Brandy, with her surgeries, reaches those levels. She is *too* beautiful. Gisele Bündchen, but turned up to an 11. That is how we get to the same object, or, in this case, person, as the source of both beauty *and* sublime.

3 Hyperreality & Trans bodies (or snippets of postmodernism)

Give me a complete late-stage revision of my adult life.

Flash.

Give me anything in this whole fucking world that is exactly what it looks like!

Flash!

(Chuck Palahniuk)

In these next chapters, I will bring two theories which are at the same time absolutely needed when discussing this novel, as well as not central subjects to the discussion that I propose here. While I believe Baudrillard's theories are vital for understanding Chuck Palahniuk's writing in general, here I will only highlight the aspects I found most interesting for discussing beauty and monstrosity in *Invisible Monsters*. For more discussions on Baudrillard's theories and its applications in Palahniuk's works, see Zanini (2011), Jacobsen (2013) and Kuhn and Rubin (2009).

Meanwhile, given the characters in the book and the centrality of their gender performance for the story, I also find the need to bring some theory on transgender bodies. Again, while I understand the importance and sheer depth of this subject, it is not one of the main topics of my discussion. That being said, Halberstam has many published texts on this topic, of which I would recommend the works cited here, *In a queer time and place* (2005) and *Trans*: a quick and quirky account of gender variability* (2018).

With these disclaimers out of the way, on the following chapter I will present some key points of Baudrillard's theories, with a focus on the hyperreal, and, following that, I bring some discussions about trans-bodies and their spaces on our capitalist culture.

3.1 Hyperreality (or the desert of the real itself)

Give me needy emotional whining bullshit.

Flash.

Give me self-absorbed egocentric twaddle.

(Chuck Palahniuk)

Looking at supermodels in advertisements, as well as at *influencers* on social media, we must wonder how ordinary people can ever reach that level of beauty. Yet, that is what beauty brands are always trying to sell, especially to women: a way to stay young forever, to get fit, to look like them. Yet, the image that these people sell is completely made-up. Every influencer uses filters to post on Instagram. Every publicity picture is doctored to make the models look younger, thinner, or smoother. It is impossible for an actual person to look like that in real life. Our ideals of beauty are so far removed from reality, as we discussed in the previous chapter, that we arrive at what Baudrillard (1994) calls *hyperreality*. In this chapter, we will discuss Baudrillard's concepts that base the analysis to come in chapter 4: simulation, simulacra and hyperreality.

At this point, it becomes necessary to talk about postmodernism in order to continue the discussion into Baudrillard's and Palahniuk's writings. Postmodernism can be defined in several ways, but discussing postmodernism is not the objective of this work, therefore, I will not go into detailed comparison of postmodernist theories. I have chosen to work with Baudrillard's views on postmodernism, mainly because, after discussing his theory on hyperreality, simulation and simulacra, which will hopefully prove fit to approach *Invisible Monsters*, it became apparent that he would be the foundation of this part of the discussion. It was also a natural choice, seeing as my advisor's own work with Palahniuk's writing uses Baudrillard as the theoretical foundation (ZANINI, 2011).

Baudrillard himself, even if frequently attributed the label of postmodernist, did not consider himself as such. That is not an issue for this discussion, since the classification of Baudrillard or Palahniuk as postmodernists is not of great concern to this research. Much more relevant is the fact that they were both writing at around the same time and were concerned about similar topics, even if in different styles of literary production. Baudrillard's first book was published in 1968, with *Simulacra and Simulation*, one of his best-known works, being

first published in 1981. Meanwhile, Palahniuk's first published book, *Fight Club*, comes out in 1996, with *Invisible Monsters* published in 1999, but written in the late 80's. That puts *Invisible Monsters* right in the period that Baudrillard talks about in his writings. Even if Palahniuk did not read Baudrillard's ideas directly, he clearly reflects them in his own writing. Both are preoccupied with late-stage capitalist society and its impacts in our culture.

From more abstract prehistoric art, through the paintings of the renaissance, to photography, we have a movement of realism in art, as we saw in the previous chapter. However, nowadays, with photoshop and CGI, we have a movement past realism, hyperrealism. Through technology, we arrive at a simulation of reality, but more real. In the following pages, I will address Baudrillard's theories, as seen in *Simulation and Simulacra* (1994) and in *The Transparency of Evil* (2009). In doing so, I will define each of the three main concepts proposed by Baudrillard, *simulation*, *simulacra* and *hyperreality*, and discuss how they are still relevant to this day, or perhaps even more relevant now, in the age of social media.

Baudrillard opens *Simulacra and Simulation* with a quote from Ecclesiastes, which states that "the simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none" (BAUDRILLARD, 1994, p. 1). Starting with this punch to the face, from the idea that there is no truth, the author goes on to develop his theories about reality. For Baudrillard, we live in the age of simulation, not of reality. "Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal." (p. 1). We have now crossed "into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials" (p. 2). There are no more imitations or duplications, we came to a point where the real has been substituted by the signs of the real. And when we only have the image of the real, it becomes dangerous to look into it, since it might reveal that there is nothing behind it, it was just a sign of the real all along.

Such is simulation, insofar as it is opposed to representation. Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real (even if this equivalence is Utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the Utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum. (BAUDRILLARD, 1994, p. 6)

As an example of how this affects us, Baudrillard cites the Lascaux caves, where, to preserve the original, a perfect replica was built a few meters away. Visitors look through a small peephole at the original, and then go visit the replica. So, when a visitor remembers the caves, do they remember the original or the replica? Similarly, we can think of historical events that were represented in some sort of media, such as HBO's *Chernobyl* (2019), or Nolan's *Dunkirk* (2017). When we think of those events, are we thinking of history or of their mediatic representations? According to Baudrillard (1994), it does not matter, because after the caves were duplicated or history was adapted to the screen, both instances are now artificial. Most famously, shortly after the movie *Downfall* (2005), many people would conjure Bruno Ganz's representation of Hitler as the first image in their heads when thinking about the dictator.

Our relationship with images and what they represent is complicated because we deal with different levels of simulacra in our daily lives. Baudrillard (1994, p. 121) describes the three orders of simulacra as follows: first, "simulacra that are natural, naturalist, founded on the image, on imitation and counterfeit, that are harmonious, optimistic, and that aim for the restitution or the ideal institution of nature made in God's image"; second, "simulacra that are productive, productivist, founded on energy, force, its materialization by the machine and in the whole system of production – a Promethean aim of a continuous globalization and expansion, of an indefinite liberation of energy"; and third, "simulacra of simulation, founded on information, the model, the cybernetic game-total operationality, hyperreality, aim of total control". As Zanini (2011) puts it, the first order "was typical of the period starting in the Renaissance up to the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century" (p. 118); the second, "is characteristic of the Industrial period in the nineteenth century" (p. 119); and the third characterizes "contemporary times" (p. 120). It is not always clear with which type of simulacra we are dealing with, and they can be deceiving.

That happens because we are used to associate images with concepts, believing it has a direct connection to reality. However, as Baudrillard (1994) posits, images have four successive phases, when we consider them as related to reality. In the first phase, an image will reflect reality, such as a photograph. In the second, the image will mask or pervert reality, such as a realistic painting. In the third phase, the image masks the absence of reality, such as with mass production items, which are designed with the only purpose of being sold. Lastly, in the fourth phase, the image has no relation to reality, such as something created to be used in virtual reality. This progressive detachment from reality is pervasive in our culture.

Baudrillard (1994, p. 12) talks about Disneyland as “a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra”. The illusions created by the characters and the imaginary worlds in which they inhabit create an almost religious experience, so over the top that it makes the things outside of the park seem real. The parks work to conceal the fact that “the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle” (p. 13). What happens inside the park is, then, neither true nor false, it is, rather, a place where the imaginary works to recreate the fiction of reality of the life outside the parks. To maintain the illusion of the real, Disneyland (and many other places) serve as a “waste-treatment plant” (p. 13) of dreams, history and of the imaginary. These are the waste products of a hyperreal civilization, which must be dealt with, as to maintain everyone under the simulation of reality. Just as Disneyland recycles the imaginary, there are many other institutions that recycle other functions, either physical or mental. Instead of walking, one can go jogging; instead of talking, we send messages; instead of eating, we diet. A mental catastrophe would be the expected development for a system like this. As Baudrillard (1994, p. 14) concludes, this catastrophe would be visible in “the incredible coexistence of the most bizarre theories and practices, which correspond to the improbable coalition of luxury, heaven, and money, to the improbable luxurious materialization of life and to undiscoverable contradictions”. We see this in the disparity between the richest and the poorest in many places. In Brazil, a photographer famously snapped a photo of the contrast between the rich neighborhood of Morumbi and the very poor favela of Paraisópolis, pictured below.

Figure 17 – Contrast between rich and poor neighborhoods



Source: El País, photograph by Tuca Vieira²⁴

When fighting against these disparities, Baudrillard (1994) highlights that the most common complaint is that capital does not follow the rules of the game, “as if capital were linked by a contract to the society it rules” (p. 15), which it never was. Capital is, rather, a challenge to that society, which must be answered following the symbolic law. We no longer live in a logic of facts nor in the order of reason, but rather in a logic of simulation, which puts more value in the models than in facts. Facts can belong to several models at once, which allows for completely different interpretations of them to be true, even if these interpretations are complete opposites. In that sense, every discourse is circular, because we are always trying to prove that one thing is not the other: “proving the real through the imaginary, proving truth through scandal, proving the law through transgression, proving work through striking, proving

²⁴ <https://english.elpais.com/usa/2022-01-26/nearly-20-years-on-since-famous-snapshot-of-inequality-in-brazil-little-has-changed.html>, retrieved April 13, 2023.

the system through crisis, and capital through revolution” (p. 19). Everything has turned into its opposite.

Hyperreality and simulation are deterrents of every principle and every objective, they turn against power the deterrent that it used so well for such a long time. Because in the end, throughout its history it was capital that first fed on the deconstruction of every referential, of every human objective, that shattered every ideal distinction between true and false, good and evil, in order to establish a radical law of equivalence and exchange, the iron law of its power. Capital was the first to play at deterrence, abstraction, disconnection, deterritorialization, etc., and if it is the one that fostered reality, the reality principle, it was also the first to liquidate it by exterminating all use value, all real equivalence of production and wealth, in the very sense we have of the unreality of the stakes and the omnipotence of manipulation. (BAUDRILLARD, 1994, p. 22)

This is why, as Baudrillard (1994) puts it, we have a hysteria of production and reproduction of the real. Our production models continue to produce and overproduce as a way for restoring the real that was lost. That works for material production of goods, and for immaterial productions as well, such as power. Power, as the author argues, has produced only signs of itself for a while, because the collective demands signs of power more than it does actual power, creating the obsession with power that we see today.

The imaginary was the alibi of the real, in a world dominated by the reality principle. Today, it is the real that has become the alibi of the model, in a world controlled by the principle of simulation. And, paradoxically, it is the real that has become our true Utopia – but a Utopia that is no longer in the realm of the possible, that can only be dreamt of as one would dream of a lost object. (BAUDRILLARD, 1994, p. 122-123)

“We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning.” (BAUDRILLARD, 1994, p. 79) And our society is collapsing precisely because of that. While we believe that information produces meaning, what happens is the opposite: information destroys its own meaning. The author gives two main reasons for that destruction: first, because instead of creating meaning, information “exhausts itself in the staging of meaning” (p. 80), such as with nondirective interviews, or, nowadays, with everyone participating in the creation of information; and second, because of the expansion of communication, information makes so much pressure that it de-structures the social, leading to complete entropy.

Finally, *the medium is the message* not only signifies the end of the message, but also the end of the medium. There are no more media in the literal sense of the word (I’m

speaking particularly of electronic mass media) - that is, of a mediating power between one reality and another, between one state of the real and another. Neither in content, nor in form. (BAUDRILLARD, 1994, p. 82)

The fact that we now consume information and communicate with each other through what we call *social media* would likely make Baudrillard either laugh in everyone's faces or say a gigantic "I told you so". Through social media, we are neither truly social, nor truly informed. The medium has indeed died and is now maintaining the simulacra of it still working as expected, so as to maintain its power.

Repetition is how our society creates, but that repetition is usually not perfect. A painting of a tree will never be a tree, and neither will a photograph, no matter how faithful they are to reality. The recreation of something is, as of yet, impossible, even with our best efforts. As Palahniuk (1999, p. 14) puts it, "What's burning down is a re-creation of a period revival house patterned after a copy of a copy of a copy of a mock-Tudor big manor house. It's a hundred generations removed from anything original, but the truth is aren't we all?" We have become so used to our imperfect copies, that the idea of the double is a recurring theme in horror stories. Baudrillard (1994) also talks about the double, as "an imaginary figure, which, just like the soul, the shadow, the mirror image, haunts the subject like his other" (p. 95). That is a description of the classic use of the double in most stories, in which the double serves as a representation of some sort of death. This death is usually avoided, when the double remains a shadow, however, once the double is materialized, the threat becomes imminent.

In other words, the imaginary power and wealth of the double – the one in which the strangeness and at the same time the intimacy of the subject to itself are played out (*heimlich/unheimlich*) – rests on its immateriality, on the fact that it is and remains a phantasm. Everyone can dream, and must have dreamed his whole life, of a perfect duplication or multiplication of his being, but such copies only have the power of dreams, and are destroyed when one attempts to force the dream into the real. (BAUDRILLARD, 1994, p. 95)

That is what Brandy is: the materialization of Shannon's double, the evidence of Shannon's metaphorical death. Brandy shows up when Shannon kills her own beauty, which was her main characteristic, the way she made money, the source of nearly all of her experiences. In that sense, Brandy's transformation is perfectly resonant of Baudrillard's theories. She goes through the surgeries to become a woman not because she wants to, but precisely because she does not.

A sexual reassignment surgery is a miracle for some people, but if you don't want one, it's the ultimate form of self-mutilation. She says, "Not that it's bad being a woman. This might be wonderful, if I wanted to be a woman. The point is," Brandy says, "being a woman is the last thing I want. It's just the biggest mistake I could think to make." (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 259)

This topic is further developed in chapter 4.2. With her surgeries, Brandy aims at becoming not only as beautiful as Shannon, but even more beautiful. That is how she becomes what Baudrillard (2009) calls transsexual, "not in any anatomical sense, but rather in the more general sense of transvestitism, of playing with the commutability of the signs of sex" (p. 22). After the social revolutions of the 70's, Baudrillard (2009) defends, everything evolved into a trans version of itself. That is, everything is now not simply one singular thing, but rather, a spectrum of many things. "The law that is imposed on us is the law of the confusion of categories. Everything is sexual. Everything is political. Everything is aesthetic. All at once" (p. 10). That is how he gets to the transsexuality of the sexual body, meaning the artificial state and the fluidity of the signs of sex.

As Baudrillard (2009) describes La Cicciolina, a porn star, we immediately draw parallels to Brandy. He describes her as being "product of a glacial aesthetic", "a numbed android who by virtue of this very fact was perfect raw material for a synthetic idol" (p. 23). He ponders also, if La Cicciolina is not also a transsexual, with her

long platinum hair, her customized breasts, her realer-than-real curves worthy of an inflatable doll, her lyophilic eroticism borrowed from a comic-strip or science-fiction world, and above all the hyperbole of her (never perverse or libertine) sexual discourse – all conspire to offer a ready-made and total sinfulness. (p. 23)

She is, in short, the model of the feminine sexuality, "complete with a carnivorous erotic ideology that no modern woman could possibly espouse – except, that is, for a transsexual" (p. 23). That is exactly what we see in Brandy. Her surgeries had her already model-good-looking sister as a parameter, and she is even more beautiful than that. "Brandy takes off her Ray-Bans for a better look. She takes off her Hermès scarf and shakes her hair out full, looking good, biting her lips, wetting her lips with her tongue just in case Manus wakes up." (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 206) Not only does she look good, but she uses all of her surgically-acquired attributes as a sexual weapon.

Brandy's fight is against cultural expectations. She believes that we are so severely influenced by our cultures that it is basically impossible to leave it. "Brandy says, 'And if you

can find any way out of our culture, then that's a trap, too. Just wanting to get out of the trap reinforces the trap.” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 220) That is what we discussed when talking about Eco (2004) in chapter 2.2, beauty of consumption has something for you to aim at, no matter what you want. If you wish to be skinny and blonde, you can aim at Gisele Bündchen, but if you wish, you can also aspire to be Kim Kardashian. If you like tattoos, that can be bought as well, as can whichever color of hair. With the right diet and exercise, you can become whoever you wish. And if these things are not enough, you can always make a medical choice: you can go from Botox to a sex change, anything you can pay for, you can be.

It's because we're so trapped in our culture, in the being of being human on this planet with the brains we have, and the same two arms and two legs everybody has. We're so trapped that any way we could imagine to escape would be just another part of the trap. Anything we want, we're trained to want. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 259)

That is why Brandy's aim is to do the opposite of what she wanted. “She says, ‘Don't do what you want.’ She says, ‘Do what you don't want. Do what you're trained not to want.’ It's the opposite of following your bliss. Brandy tells me, ‘Do the things that scare you the most.’” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 221) After all, nothing is real, not even you.

“There isn't any real you in you,” she says. “Even your physical body, all your cells will be replaced within eight years.” [...] Nothing of you is all-the-way yours. All of you is inherited. “Relax,” Brandy says, “Whatever you're thinking, a million other folks are thinking. Whatever you do, they're doing, and none of you is responsible. All of you is a cooperative effort.” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 218)

All you are is a copy of a copy of a copy, trying to be original, which is very tough when even our language limits us.

“You're a product of our language,” Brandy says, “and how our laws are and how we believe our God wants us. Every bitty molecule about you has already been thought out by some million people before you,” she says. “Anything you can do is boring and old and perfectly okay. You're safe because you're so trapped inside your culture. Anything you can conceive of is fine because you can conceive of it. You can't imagine any way to escape. There's no way you can get out,” Brandy says. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 219)

Shannon and Evie's favorite spot to hang out also highlights the author's view of hyperreality in the story. They would go to a department store and pretend that the furniture showcases were home.

Customers would stroll by and there would be Evie and me sprawled on a pink canopy bed, calling for our horoscopes on her cell phone. We'd be curled on a tweedy sofa sectional, munching popcorn and watching our soaps on a console color television. Evie will pull up her T-shirt to show me another new belly button piercing. She'll pull down the armhole of her blouse and show me the scars from her implants. "It's too lonely at my real house," Evie would say, "And I hate how I don't feel real enough unless people are watching." (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 69)

Just like Disneyland is a simulacrum of fantasy, a department store is a simulacrum of real life. It shows us what we are supposed to want, new appliances, expensive furniture, fully matching rooms. That hyperreal space was better than their homes, with Evie's parents not accepting that she is a trans woman and Shannon's parents paying attention only to Shane. "It's so safe and peaceful, here," Evie'd say, smoothing the pink satin comforter and fluffing the pillows. "Nothing very bad could ever happen to you here. Not like at school. Or at home." (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 71) Their real life was too much, or not enough, so they found a place that was just real enough to make them comfortable, but also sufficiently hyperreal for them to know that they were being watched.

Even after spending her free time at a department store, Shannon goes on to say, about Brandy's Real Life Training that "Stealing drugs, selling drugs, buying clothes, renting luxury cars, taking clothes back, ordering blender drinks, this isn't what I'd call Real Life, not by a long shot." (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 257) "Real Life Training" is a period that Brandy has to live as a woman, taking her prescribed hormones, before she can go through the final surgery, which would be the one in the sexual organs. Granted that their routine during that period was not very traditional, but then again, neither was Shannon's hobby of spending time at a department store. Shannon does seem to be more aware of the hyperreal in others than in herself. Even nature is seen by Shannon through hyperrealistic lenses:

A few minutes of scenery go by behind glass. Just some towering mountains, old dead volcanoes, mostly the kind of stuff you find outside. Those timeless natural nature themes. Raw materials at their rawest. Unrefined. Unimproved rivers. Poorly maintained mountains. Filth. Plants growing in dirt. Weather. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 80)

But she does not seem to realize that she has these views. The way she tells the story also has several hyperreal aspects, being repetition the most notable one. Characters we thought were different people turn out to be the same, their roles in the story repeat, leaving us with the distinct impression of the simulacra of which Baudrillard speaks, that "[i]t is no longer a

question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real” (1994, p. 2). When even people’s names do not directly correspond to distinct characters, we take away the basic knowledge that each person has their own name. Brandy is herself an instrument leading others towards the hyperreal. By giving others and herself, she takes away one more referential out of the equation, making it so that there’s one less link to the real. When she gives them invented pasts, she is taking away their references of themselves.

It is, however, not only Brandy who is working to take our referentials away. As Baudrillard (1994) explains, that is the result of our capitalist culture. When the focus is on making money, it does not matter what is real or not. What matters is how to make more money.

“I have to show you where the future ended,” says Seth. “I want us to be the people who choose the trip.”

According to Seth, the future ended in 1962 at the Seattle World’s Fair. This was everything we should’ve inherited: the whole man on the moon within this decade— asbestos is our miracle friend—nuclear-powered and fossil-fueled world of the Space Age where you could go up to visit the Jetsons’ flying saucer apartment building and then ride the monorail downtown for fun pillbox hat fashions at the Bon Marche.

All his hope and science and research and glamour left here in ruins:

The Space Needle.

The Science Center with its lacy domes and hanging light globes.

The Monorail streaking along covered in brushed aluminum.

This is how our lives were supposed to turn out.

Go there. Take the trip, Seth says. It will break your heart because the Jetsons with their robot maid, Rosie, and their flying-saucer cars and toaster beds that spit you out in the morning, it’s like the Jetsons have sublet the Space Needle to the Flintstones. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 98)

Once, there was a promise of a bright, technological future. ““The folks who go to the Space Needle now,’ Seth says, ‘they have lentils soaking at home and they’re walking around the ruins of the future the way barbarians did when they found Grecian ruins and told themselves that God must’ve built them.”” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 99) “When did the future switch from being a promise to being a threat?” (p. 103) There was a time not long ago, when most people were excited for the future. However, Baudrillard (1994) defends that

No, melancholia is the fundamental tonality of functional systems, of current systems of simulation, of programming and information. Melancholia is the inherent quality of the mode of the disappearance of meaning, of the mode of the volatilization of meaning in operational systems. And we are all melancholic.

Melancholia is the brutal disaffection that characterizes our saturated systems. Once the hope of balancing good and evil, true and false, indeed of confronting some values of the same order, once the more general hope of a relation of forces and a stake has

vanished. Everywhere, always, the system is too strong: hegemonic. (1994, p. 162-163)

Indeed, Baudrillard finishes *Simulacra and Simulation* by saying that if nihilism were the way to challenge the system, then theoretical violence would be the only resource left. However, even that is a utopic feeling, because death itself has already lost its meaning.

3.2 Trans bodies (or a queer adjustment of perspective)

Give me tolerance.

Flash.

Give me understanding.

Flash.

(Chuck Palahniuk)

In the heavily urbanized, capitalist society, people such as our characters, who are outside the norms of heterosexual culture, live in the margins of that society. These people, and our characters, are relegated to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group²⁵. While our characters are mainly marginalized because of their gender fluency, there are many different types of people who live at the margins of our society. These people live queer lives, in the sense that they do not follow the expected rules of that society, and, for now following these expectations, these people are more expandable, their shorter lives, shortened by the ample distribution of drugs and lack of healthcare in these communities, “is simply business as usual” (HALBERSTAM, 2005, p. 4). Indeed, Shane’s death, “confirmed” only by phone, does not raise any questions; since he was viewed as queer, that was the presumed outcome. Just as Shane’s life was expandable for his perceived queerness, so too is Shannon’s sacrifice of her life to give Brandy legitimacy equally easy to accept. After all, she had been living on the outskirts of society for nearly a year and basically nobody noticed.

Halberstam (2005) defends that queer time and space are conceived in opposition to bourgeois’ expected life goals and behaviors. In the presumed standard heterosexual life, people are expected to grow into adulthood, be married, have kids, build economic stability for themselves and their offspring, and live as long as possible in order to enjoy their hard-earned money. People who live their lives in ways that do not conform to this pattern, “who live in rapid bursts (drug addicts, for example) are characterized as immature and even dangerous” (p. 4-5).

²⁵ Definition of the term “marginalize” taken from to Merriam-Webster online dictionary, retrieved December 21, 2022. Link: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/marginalize>

“Queer time” is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance. “Queer space” refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics. (HALBERSTAM, 2005, p. 6).

Queer refers, then, to “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time” (HALBERSTAM, 2005, p. 6). Heteronormative time is constructed around reproduction and family, and we traditionally see people who do not conform to this way of life as *queer*. All kinds of people choose or are forced to live outside of these parameters, “during the hours when others sleep and in the spaces (physical, metaphysical, and economic) that others have abandoned” (HALBERSTAM, 2005, p. 10). Brandy, Shannon and Manus are such people. Their bodies move in the male-female spectrum through the story, and this movement is a big part of the reason why they live on the road. While Brandy and Manus’ bodies are easily visible as trans, I also look at Shannon’s body as a trans body, since she purposefully moves away from her representation of femininity. When she moves away from her beauty, she distances herself from her performance of femininity.

Halberstam (2005, p. 17) examines “the circuits of influence that allow for the emergence of the transgender body as simultaneously a symbol for postmodern flexibility and a legible form of embodied subjectivity”, discussing the lives and reactions to the deaths of transgender people. The author understands that postmodernism is “simultaneously a crisis and an opportunity – a crisis in the stability of form and meaning, and an opportunity to rethink the practice of cultural production, its hierarchies and power dynamics, its tendency to resist or capitulate” (HALBERSTAM, 2005, p. 6).

Throughout this book, I return to the transgender body as a contradictory site in postmodernism. The gender-ambiguous individual today represents a very different set of assumptions about gender than the gender-inverted subject of the early twentieth century; and as a model of gender inversion recedes into anachronism, the transgender body has emerged as futurity itself, a kind of heroic fulfillment of postmodern promises of gender flexibility. Why has gender flexibility become a site of both fascination and promise in the late twentieth century and what did this new flexibility have to do with other economies of flexibility within postmodernism? (HALBERSTAM, 2005, p. 18)

This flexibility of gender representation in the body became a commodity – which is commercialized through cosmetic surgeries and procedures, clothes branding, media presence – appropriated by the system, even if not completely accepted by it. If this flexibility can be

thought of as postmodern or even a move towards social change, it can also be understood as “advertising strategies of huge corporations like the Gap, who sell their products by casting their consumers as simultaneously all the same and all different” (HALBERSTAM, 2005, p. 18). This acceptance is also related to the opportunities for medical and pharmaceutical procedures to make money out of transgender bodies, as Halberstam (2018) identifies. However, even though the market identified this opportunity to make money, there is still a stigma when talking about transgender surgeries that is not applied when non-transgender people wish to modify their bodies.

That is, while currently non/transgender men and women do not have to undergo psychiatric evaluation before having any kind of cosmetic surgery, unless there are other indicators of mental instability, so transgender men and women should be able to elect body modifications without psychiatric evaluation unless they too exhibit unstable behaviors. (HALBERSTAM, 2018, p. 34)

Even if those opportunities are still not optimal, they were fought for by transgender people, looking for their rights to be and express themselves as they wish. “Today we have an abundance of names for who we are and some people actively desire that space of the unnamable again. This book explains how we came to be trans* and why having a name for oneself can be as damaging as lacking one.” (HALBERSTAM, 2018, p. 4) Because some labels originated on a wish to conform others to the dominant (white, male, heterosexual) European culture. And some are harder to overcome than others, as happens with the name *transsexual*, according to Halberstam (2018), since the terminology comes from a medical perspective, and most transgender people still rely on medical procedures and pharmaceuticals to be who they wish to be. “The terms homosexual/heterosexual and transsexual as well as other markers like man/woman, masculine/feminine, whiteness/blackness/brownness, are all historically variable terms, untethered in fixed or for that matter natural or inevitable ways to bodies and populations.” (HALBERSTAM, 2018, p. 8)

This also manifests in the ideas of *labeling* as a sort of oppression, and of a radical uniqueness, which, Halberstam (2005) defends, come from that very same heteronormative, late-capitalist society, that sells uniqueness as the norm, and maintains queer people under the rule of consumption. This avoidance of labeling, the author argues, may become a sort of erasure, since without these pesky *labels*, queer communities will lack the unity to open space

for themselves. And it is in these communities that the fight for rights happens and where queer members find safety.

That is, perhaps, why our trio, even when running from the city, find their refuge in suburban settings, since “in rural settings queers are easily identified and punished” (HALBERSTAM, 2005, p. 35). Halberstam’s (2005) reading that when talking about authenticity, queer people disturb the distinctions between authentic and inauthentic, original and copy, goes directly towards two of the main topics previously approached in this thesis, namely, Cohen’s (1996) theses on monstrosity and Baudrillard’s (1994) theories on hyperreality. When thinking about the narratives created around queer people who were murdered because of their gender-bending, Halberstam (2005, p. 45) understands that there are no *true accounts*, “but only fictions, and the whole story turns on the production of counterfeit realities that are so convincing that they replace and subsume the real”. That is, we create a narrative that displaces reality – since we have no way of actually reaching that reality, not only because of the reasons we discussed before, given by Baudrillard, but also because the subject is dead and can give no account – and substitutes it without much pushback.

Halberstam (2005) analyzes the case of Brandon, a trans man who was very successful with women and was murdered because of that. In this case, we see the simulation of masculinity in such a way that the simulacrum is more successful than its so-called *real* counterparts. However, as a trans person, he is seen as an outsider, as not-belonging to that society, as a monster, per Cohen’s (1996) categories. If a monster is “the harbinger of category crisis” (p. 6), we can understand trans people as monsters to a society that enforces the roles of men and women as distinctly opposed. At the same time, we understand his death as a sort of twisted revenge, because he was more successful in his portrayal of masculinity, so we also understand that the “fear of the monster is really a kind of desire” (p. 16) to be as successful as Brandon was. “This case itself hinges on the production of a ‘counterfeit’ masculinity that even though it depends on deceit and illegality, turns out to be more compelling, seductive, and convincing than the so-called real masculinities with which it competes” (HALBERSTAM, 2005, p. 45). That is also the view that Palahniuk brings in his later writing of a transexual woman, in *Speaking Bitterness* (a short story in 2005’s novel *Haunted*), when a cis woman says to Miranda, a trans woman, that she is “a total sex-doll fantasy, the kind of woman only a man would become” (PALAHNIUK, 2005, p. 289). That is, a sort of femininity that out-does that of so-called *real* women. But if those simulations are more convincing than the *real*, does it

even make any difference? As we have seen before, when discussing Baudrillard, no, because, when we stop to think about it, even *real*, cis women manifest femininity in hyperreal ways.

When we think of Kim Kardashian's bodily representation of the ideal feminine form, or a previous sex symbol such as Pamela Anderson, with their surgeries to accentuate certain traits, are they also not transgender? Are these surgeries not also *sex affirmation surgeries*, if we understand that by going through them, they reaffirm their womanhood? That is all to make it clear that, while it is important for this research to discuss trans bodies, as it is a central topic to the story, and I analyze it as one of the aspects of Brandy's monstrosity, it is not only in trans people that we find these characteristics and behaviors. It is, however, how Brandy's monstrosity is articulated, through Shannon's projection of societal rules and expectations, and therefore, relevant to this analysis.

For Halberstam (2005), the term *transgender* serves as an umbrella for every cross-identifying person, but this expansion makes the definition of the term a little unclear. Defining the term 'transgender' is important for "people who want to place themselves in the way of particular forms of recognition. Transgender may indeed be considered a term of relationality; it describes not simply an identity but a relation between people, within a community, or within intimate bonds." (HALBERSTAM, 2005, p. 49). It is, however, a hard definition to make, since some of the people who identify as transgender live by defying narratives. Transgender, for Halberstam (2005), is the category that came to bridge the gap in categorization between a lesbian/gay and a transsexual. That is the definition that works for our characters, as we will further discuss in chapter 4.

Halberstam (2005) goes on to differentiate realness and the real, as terms applied to the balls and voguing community. Realness is "not exactly performance, not exactly an imitation; it is the way that people, minorities, excluded from the domain of the real, appropriate the real and its effects" (p. 51). "Realness – the appropriation of the attributes of the real, one could say – is precisely the transsexual condition" (p. 52); while the real "is that which always exists elsewhere, and as a fantasy of belonging and being" (p. 52).

The ever receding horizon of the real, however, need not be the downfall of transsexual aspiration; indeed, it may be its strength. Needless to say, the fantasy that many queers may entertain of gender realness is extremely important as we challenge the limits of theories of performance. Prosser suggests that transsexuals become real literally through authorship, by writing themselves into transition. (HALBERSTAM, 2005, p. 52)

That is, of course, resounding of the discussion in the previous chapter about Baudrillard's theories. Our relations with reality are mediated by simulacra of the real, so much so that we lose their references in anything real. Then, why not have people rewrite their own realities, as Brandy does? If our patriarchal, capitalist, heteronormative culture already imposed this loosening of referentials, why shouldn't people write their own stories? Why not appropriate the space we need?

4 Close Reading (or some things can never be unread)

*Give me clarity. Give me reasons. Give me answers.
Flash.*

(Chuck Palahniuk)

In this chapter, I will bring the theories of Monstrosity, Beauty, the Sublime, Hyperreality and Transgender discussed in the previous chapters, to the novel. This analysis is divided in two parts, focused on bringing the topics discussed in the previous chapters to the novel. The focus of the discussion will be Brandy, our queen supreme and central guiding character, and Shannon, our narrator.

The story is told by Shannon, but the main character is Brandy, as Shannon herself tells us: “So of course this’ll be all about Brandy, hosted by me, with guest appearances by Evelyn Cottrell and the deadly AIDS virus.” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 19) The novel is written *in media res*, starting with a wedding literally going up in flames: the bride, Evie, is halfway down the stairs, naked inside her dress which was consumed by the fire, holding a shotgun; Brandy bleeding out of a shotgun wound at the bottom of the stairs; and Shannon, our narrator, also standing at the bottom of the stairs. Our narrator already starts to impart on us her hyperrealist point of view, as per the theory discussed in section 3.1:

What I tell myself is the gush of red pumping out of Brandy’s bullet hole is less like blood than it’s some sociopolitical tool. The thing about being cloned from all those shampoo commercials, well, that goes for me and Brandy Alexander, too. Shotgunning anybody in this room would be the moral equivalent of killing a car, a vacuum cleaner, a Barbie doll. Erasing a computer disk. Burning a book. Probably that goes for killing anybody in the world. We’re all such products. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 12)

We learn that it was Shannon who set fire to the house as revenge for Evie having slept with Shannon’s ex-fiancé, Manus, which we learn further ahead. Shannon starts telling the story in a series of flashes, jumping back and forth.

Don’t expect this to be the kind of story that goes: and then, and then, and then. What happens here will have more of that fashion magazine feel, a Vogue or a Glamour magazine chaos with page numbers on every second or fifth or third page. Perfume cards falling out, and full-page naked women coming out of nowhere to sell you make-up.

Don't look for a contents page, buried magazine-style twenty pages back from the front. Don't expect to find anything right off. There isn't a real pattern to anything, either. Stories will start and then, three paragraphs later:
Jump to page whatever.
Then, jump back. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 20)

As the story jumps back and forth, we learn more about Shannon's life. Her brother supposedly died of AIDS-related complications, which turned their parents' attitude from kicking their son out of the house for suspecting him of being gay to a little too avid supporters of the gay community. Her fiancé, Manus, makes increasingly more on-the-nose comments about being gay, while her friend, Evie, steals her clothes and sleeps with Manus. Eventually, Shannon gets shot in the face, losing her jaw. At the hospital, she meets Brandy Alexander, a trans woman who is going through voice therapy. Brandy has a very peculiar life philosophy, believing in constructing new stories to shape her, instead of relying on the past. "Your perception is all fucked up," Brandy says. "All you can talk about is trash that's already happened." She says, "You can't base your life on the past or the present." Brandy says, "You have to tell me about your future." (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 60) After Shannon leaves the hospital, she goes to spend some time at Evie's house, which is when Manus gets there, to confront Evie with a knife. Shannon goes to Manus with Evie's rifle and takes Manus as hostage. She sets fire to Evie's house, and drives off in Manus' car, with him drugged in the trunk. She goes to talk to Brandy, who is living with the Rhea Sisters – the ones who pay for Brandy's surgeries. There, Shannon finds out Brandy is her presumed-dead brother, Shane, who had been expelled from their home after their parents found out he had gonorrhea. They presumed he got it because he was gay, but he was actually being abused by a cop – no other than Manus himself.

Brandy gets home, meets Shannon there and decides to spend the necessary months before her final surgery, or "Real Life Training", on the road with Shannon. The two of them, plus Manus, who was still in the car, end up journeying through North America. They live by stealing drugs from open houses and alternatively taking and selling them. "We were all running from something. Vaginoplasty. Aging. The future." (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 239) Shannon is also putting hormones in Manus' and Brandy's drinks, to try and kill them, but eventually she decides that this is going too slowly and starts to formulate a plan to speed things up.

They end up in a house and discover that the realtor is Evie's mother, who tells them that she is marrying Evie off to "some poor man" (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 268). That is when

Shannon decides to crash the wedding reception and again burn down Evie's house and, hopefully, get Brandy killed. She does set the house on fire and gets Brandy shot by Evie, with the added bonus of getting Manus to have sex with Evie's newlywed husband. That is also the point where the novel starts. Brandy survives her wound and finishes her surgeries, with Shannon leaving all her documents to her, so Brandy can live the life she wants, while Shannon goes to live a quiet life.

Our four main characters are, to a certain extent, gender-benders. Shannon denies her beauty, which, as discussed in 2.2, is one of the main representations of femininity in our society, and Brandy's over-the-top beauty is one of the aspects that makes her sublime, as presented in 2.3. Evie and Brandy are transgender. With their surgeries, they try to emulate Shannon's former beauty. Manus is being fed female hormones unbeknownst to himself. Gender-bending fits perfectly into Cohen's (1996) theses on monstrosity, as suggested in 2.1.1. By refusing to accept society's imposition of heteronormative life, the characters are themselves a threat to that society, as proposed in 3.2.

With the summary above and the main theories briefly revisited, the following sections discuss Shannon's and Brandy's articulations with monstrosity, focusing on the former's beauty and the latter's sublime.

4.1 Shannon's beauty and monstrosity

Flash.

Give me malice.

Flash.

Give me detached existentialist ennui.

Flash.

Give me rampant intellectualism as a coping mechanism.

(Chuck Palahniuk)

Looking at beauty and monstrosity, we see the first articulations of approximation and distancing of this analysis. Traditionally, we think of beauty and monstrosity as opposite poles, as in *Beauty and the Beast*, where the Beast's moral failings are reflected in his monstrous appearance, whereas Belle's beauty reflects her moral goodness. In *Invisible Monsters*, however, we have characters that defy this traditional opposition. A clear example of this is Shannon.

While Shannon was beautiful, she was full of resentment for her brother – and, indeed, for everyone else. She did not really like her brother, her parents, her fiancé, or her best friend. After losing her mandible, she got to really know her brother, her fiancé, and her friend in ways she did not before. From her initial point of view, her beauty hinders her capacity of relating to people. She believes everyone is only interested in her because she is beautiful, which might be the reason why she does not have to make an effort to have these relationships. “My point is that, if I'm honest, my life is all about me.” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 17) That line comes when Shannon is watching Evie's dream literally burning down and Brandy bleeding out on the floor. “My point is I know Brandy is maybe probably going to die, but I just can't get into it.” (p. 17). She just cannot be bothered to care that her brother is dying. Because of her beauty, her whole life she was the center of attention, so much so that instead of being sad that her brother died, she was annoyed that her parents were paying too much attention to him. Shannon's monstrosity is of the moral kind while she is beautiful, and it is only after she deforms herself, externalizing her monstrosity, that she begins to change.

Only after deformity does she have the chance to meet Shane, now as Brandy, to really know Manus, and to discover that Evie is a trans woman. Looking back, she even says that Manus' and Evie's queerness were supposed to be clear, and that Shane was always miserable,

but she was too self-centered to really pay attention to anyone else. “I don’t know why I forgot, but Shane had always looked so miserable.” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 290) It is not that she *forgot*, but rather that she never bothered really paying attention to him, or to anyone else. When Shannon finds out Evie is trans, she is shocked that she had not realized that earlier. “Evie was a man. And I just have to sit down. Evie was a man. And I saw her implant scars. Evie was a man. And I saw her naked in fitting rooms.” (p. 269) Evie even talks about a trans allegory for Cinderella,

Evie starts telling me about an idea she has for a remake of Cinderella, only instead of the little birds and animals making her a dress, they do cosmetic surgery. Bluebirds give her a facelift. Squirrels give her implants. Snakes, liposuction. Plus, Cinderella starts out as a lonely little boy. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 243)

But Shannon is too intent on herself to understand what Evie is saying. We see the same with Manus and Evie’s relationship when she says “I could’ve just watched the stupid infomercial and known Manus and Evie had some tortured sick relationship they wanted to think was true love. Okay, I did watch it. Okay, about a hundred times I watched it, but I was only watching myself.” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 120) She was always too preoccupied with her own beauty to look at anyone else, just like the people who got invited to the taping of that infomercial, who “[...] are staring at themselves in the monitor staring at themselves in the monitor staring at themselves in the monitor, on and on, completely trapped in a reality loop that never ends.” (p. 118) Her own beauty was a distraction from everything and everyone else. She only looks at herself, trapped in her own reality loop.

Before, when she was beautiful, she was always mad at everyone for not being how she wanted them to be, or for not being her. Evie was not skinny enough to wear her clothes, as Shannon mentions several times during the story, for example, “the closets full of her own clothes, stretched to death by the giant evil Evie Cottrell” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 157-158). Shannon also focuses on Brandy’s hands, which were too big compared to her own. “You see, the size of a man’s hands are the one thing a plastic surgeon can’t change. The one thing that will always give away a girl like Brandy Alexander. There’s just no way to hide those hands.” (p. 293) From the very first pages, Shannon focuses on Brandy’s hands, as they are the one thing that could not be modified to be like hers. Indeed, she expects that everyone is like that, saying “Everybody here thinks the whole story is about them. Definitely that goes for everybody in the world.” (p. 272). But by the end of the story, Shannon seems to have mellowed

out somewhat, when she says that “It takes more effort to hate Evie than it used to. My whole life is moving farther away from any reason to hate her. It’s moving far away from reason itself. It takes a cup of coffee and a Dexedrine capsule to feel even vaguely pissed about anything.” (p. 270-271) And, indeed, by the end, she leaves everything she still has from her former life to Brandy to live, as proof of love. It was only by leaving her own beauty behind that she was able to love her brother.

Looking at the time she spent at the hospital, there Shannon was still incapable of loving anyone, and, indeed, was still stuck on her past. While there, she was still thinking about going back to her former life, which, according to Brandy, is the third most boring thing in the world, “your sorry-assed past” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 112). The doctors were trying to convince her to have a reconstructive surgery for her mandible, and the nuns who were taking care of her were trying to make her settle and have a traditional life.

The nun’s arrived with the man and his I.V. stand, a new man with no skin or crushed features or all his teeth bashed out, a man who’d be perfect for me. My one true love. My deformed or mutilated or diseased prince charming. My unhappily ever after. My hideous future. The monstrous rest of my life. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 58)

At that time, Shannon still wanted to revert to how she was before.

The whole time I was in the hospital, no way could I fall in love. I just couldn’t go there yet. Settle for less. I didn’t want to process through anything. I didn’t want to pick up any pieces. Lower my expectations. Get on with my less-than life. I didn’t want to feel better about being still alive. Start compensating. I just wanted my face fixed, if that was possible, which it wasn’t. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 48)

Her wish to go back keeps her tied to her spiteful past. She still hates everyone, but she begins to realize that it is because she hates herself:

We’d go anywhere to look good by comparison, and what I realize is mostly what I hate about Evie is the fact that she’s so vain and stupid and needy. But what I hate most is how she’s just like me. What I really hate is me so I hate pretty much everybody. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 266)

And since everyone is trying to be like her, it makes sense that she would hate them. She cannot understand why, if she did not want to be herself, why others should. And yet, not only does Brandy want to look specifically like *her*, but Evie and our whole society wants to look somewhat similar to her (as evidenced by her apparently successful modeling career). Yet,

we see that her wish to not be beautiful anymore is clearly not a rebellion against the beauty standard, because she still loves her former beauty. Indeed, that is what she identifies as the reason why she first was so attracted to Brandy:

Right now, looking at flashes of Brandy beside me in Manus's car, I know what it is I loved about her. What I love is myself. Brandy Alexander just looks exactly the way I looked before the accident. Why wouldn't she? She's my brother, Shane. Shane and I were almost the same height, born one year apart. The same coloring. The same features. The same hair, only Brandy's hair is in better shape. [...] What I love is myself. I was so beautiful. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 197-198)

Shannon still uses beauty as a scale for herself and for everyone else. Even if she rebels against her own beauty, we see that she still believes that beauty is the ruler by which everyone is measured. Her rebellion is not about shattering the expectation of beauty, but rather against her own beauty. She rebels not because she does not believe in the beauty myth, but because she knows that it is the measure used by everyone, and she does not want that to be her main characteristic anymore. "I was tired of staying a lower life form just because of my looks. Trading on them. Cheating. Never getting anything real accomplished, but getting the attention and recognition anyway. Trapped in a beauty ghetto is how I felt. Stereotyped. Robbed of my motivation." (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 286) It is through the monstrous act of shooting herself in the face that she sees an escape from the pressure that being beautiful imposed on her.

We can consider Shannon's act of blowing her face off as a monstrous act and understand her deformity as a monstrous characteristic, if we accept Wolf's (2002) theories that most people expect everyone to want to have her type of beauty, as discussed in 1.2.3. By deforming herself, Shannon goes against the expectations of a society that enforces extreme beauty models towards women. When Shannon takes away her own face, not only is she taking away her beauty, but she also takes away what makes us most immediately recognizable as humans, as seen in 2.2.1, when discussing Couchot's ideas. Once Shannon loses a part of her face, she also loses a part of her humanity. When that little boy calls her a monster in the supermarket, he is looking at her and not seeing a human being, because he does not recognize what she has left as a human face. Similarly, Brandy also looks at her and recognizes Shannon's facelessness as something monstrous: "'When I met you,' she says, 'I envied you. I coveted your face. I thought that face of yours will take more guts than any sex change operation. It will give you bigger discoveries. It will make you stronger than I could ever be.'" (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 261) Brandy recognizes what Shannon did to her face as a mistake, as what will give

her the opportunity for self-discovery. As Ng (2009) and Slade (2009) defend, self-mutilation is the way these characters find to rebel against the pressure of society to conform. It is through pain and deformity that they assert their individuality and try to escape from their society-mandated roles. “These days even wanting is mediated by models of the will, by forms of making people want something – by persuasion or dissuasion”, argues Baudrillard (2009, p. 51), which is why Shannon and Brandy do what they do not want. Shannon shoots herself and throws her jawbone out of the car because she “had to deal with [her] looks in a fast, permanent way or [she]’d always be tempted to go back.” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 286) Brandy goes through the surgeries to make her body into a female body not because she wanted, but precisely because she did not.

Princess Princess, she yells after me, “It’s not that I really want to be a woman.” She yells, “Wait up!” Brandy yells, “I’m only doing this because it’s just the biggest mistake I can think to make. It’s stupid and destructive, and anybody you ask will tell you I’m wrong. That’s why I have to go through with it.” Brandy says, “Don’t you see? Because we’re so trained to do life the right way. *To not make mistakes*” Brandy says, “I figure, the bigger the mistake looks, the better chance I’ll have to break out and live a real life.” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 258)

Both of them want to break away from the expectations of society: the beautiful woman goes against her beauty, which is what makes her literally a model of femininity; while the man goes against masculinity, towards this ideal feminine beauty. In a way, they think alike, that they need this extreme act to be free; on the other hand, they make opposite moves regarding beauty, and specifically, feminine beauty. By confronting and trespassing society’s boundaries of their expected gender performance, they become monstrous in Cohen’s (1996) understanding of monstrosity. Shannon and Brandy’s bodies are literally informed by society’s beauty standards, either by moving away from them or towards them; their bodies are in transition between categories, neither male nor female; their bodies are at the very margin of possibility, challenging society as well as medical technologies in order to become what they are. “In this way, Shane, we are very much brother and sister. This is the biggest mistake I could think would save me. I wanted to give up the idea I had any control. Shake things up. To be saved by chaos.” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 286) They become monstrous to escape society’s ruling over their lives.

Shannon is an avid follower of the beauty myth. She idolizes the one person she could find that was, to her, more beautiful than herself; she was engaged to a man who was so

handsome that, “with his square-jawed, cheekboned good looks [he] could be a Nazi recruiting poster” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 229). As Shannon puts it, the reason why she shot her face off was that she “was addicted to being beautiful, and that’s not something you just walk away from. Being addicted to all that attention, I had to quit cold turkey.” (p. 285) But she had a hard time adapting to her new reality, of being a monster. “I’m an invisible monster, and I’m incapable of loving anybody. You don’t know which is worse.” (p. 198) So she tells us her story full of resentment and bitterness, she tells us how inconsiderate and pathetic Manus was, how needy and envious Evie was, how much Shane took from her in her family life. However, those things are all just her thinking only about herself. “The truth is nobody here is as stupid or evil as I let on. Except me.” (p. 285) By the end of her telling, we understand that all Shane wanted was her love, Manus was struggling with his sexuality and Evie imitated her precisely because Shannon was so beautiful.

While Shane apparently goes into his endeavor knowing the consequences of his actions, Shannon seems to have wanted to become *simply ugly*, that is, to still be within society’s standards: “I wanted to be ugly” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 285). However, after she shoots herself, it seems she does not identify as an ugly person, but rather as a monster, as we see in the ways she refers to herself: “the monster without a jaw” (p. 153), “full of ways to hide my being a monster” (p. 168), “Monster Girl” (p. 182). That makes it apparent that she did not expect to change that much, maybe she expected to be *normal*, invisible by being overlooked, not monstrous and invisible by being pointedly ignored. Even after she shoots herself, we still see that she wanted some sort of attention. “Arson, kidnapping, I think I’m up to murder. Maybe all this will get me just a glimmer of attention, not the good, glorious kind, but still the national media kind.” (p. 182) Yet, even after she mutilated herself, after the mandatory attention at the hospital, with the police and photos of the *accident*, she cannot get the attention she wants. “Jump to after there were the pictures, when people stopped looking at me.” (p. 38) Manus and Evie will not look at her while she is at the hospital, they talk to her, but they look anywhere but at her. Manus “tells the eight-by-ten glossies of [her] in [her] sheet, Property of La Paloma Memorial Hospital” (p. 40) that Shannon should move on with her life and “holds the photos between [them] so [she] can’t see either them or him” (p. 41) while talking, and Evie will “tell the stack of magazines” (p. 45) about wanting Shannon to move in, and “[t]alking to her watch” (p. 45) she says Shannon’s accident was nobody’s fault (as she does not know it was no accident at all). All the attention Shannon gets comes from the nurses, which is not the kind she seeks;

no one at the market will look at her, even while she is wearing her revealing dress; Manus and Evie do not even look at her and cannot understand when she tries to talk. No one pays attention to her but Brandy, who actually takes the time to understand Shannon, and, indeed, seems to be the only one who understands what Shannon is speaking. It is no wonder that she becomes a goddess in Shannon's eyes.

4.2 Brandy's sublime and monstrosity

Give me courage.

Flash.

Give me heart.

Flash.

(Chuck Palahniuk)

Brandy's articulation of monstrosity encompasses beauty, her transgender body, and ends up in the sublime. Her path through it is led by her wish to become like Shannon, in a way, led by a wish to be loved by her sister. As discussed in 2.3, there is plenty of evidence of Brandy's sublime beauty in Shannon's speech. As also discussed there, Slade's analyses (2009; 2013) focus on body mutilation as the main source of sublime in the novel. Here, however, I will discuss their experiences with the sublime through beauty, and how that articulates with her monstrosity.

But if beauty, according to Burke (2009), is always tied to a pleasurable feeling, would not a personification of our beauty standards cause us pleasure, instead of delight? It could be argued that too much of anything is usually a bad thing. But with Burke's own theory, we can understand that the point is not the feeling that something *should* cause, but rather what it *actually causes*. Thus, if Brandy's beauty causes a sublime effect on Shannon and Manus, that is what we should analyze. As per Burke's (2009) theory, the sublime can only occur when someone is there to experience it. Therefore, here, the focus is on Shannon and how she sees Brandy, as our interlocutor, since it is through Shannon that we have the experience that is Brandy Alexander.

To start, let us look at Brandy's exaggerated beauty. As discussed in the previous chapter, Shannon projects her beauty into every aspect of her life, and even after she turns herself into a monster, as she herself says, she still looks at life with beauty as a guideline. And she was so beautiful that Evie says about her "It's just not enough for you to be the best and most beautiful," Evie says. "Most people, if they looked as good as you, they'd tread water for the rest of their lives.'" (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 277) However, Evie says that when looking at Brandy, not at Shannon. We must bear that in mind when we think of Brandy's beauty, since her surgeries had Shannon as a model. But, in fact, we get evidence that Brandy looks even more beautiful than Shannon: "Jump back to inside Suite 15-G and Pie Rhea waving an old

picture of me in my face and saying, ‘This is how she wanted to look, and tens of thousands of Katty Kathy dollars later, this is how she looks.’ Gon Rhea says, ‘Hell. Brandy looks better than that.’” (p. 178); “Just by herself, Brandy Alexander is such a shift in the beauty standard that no one thing stands out. Not even you.” (p. 58). If Brandy turns out to be such a shift in the already high beauty standard set by Shannon, how much more beautiful is Brandy? Is her beauty comprehensible at all? That is the first sublime-inducing aspect of Brandy Alexander.

As Brandy reaches a level of beauty such as to be its very embodiment, this brings her to a point where she is no longer simply a beautiful person. She becomes an aesthetically perfect woman within standards desired by society in general. However, as Burke (2009) puts it, beauty, and especially beauty in women, is not directly related to perfection. Artists have been looking for perfection as a source of beauty at least since Plato’s times. Now that the technology to alter nearly every aspect of a person’s body exists, our fiction creates imperfect characters.

Brandy goes through all those body-altering surgeries as a way of achieving the sublime, as discussed by Slade (2009; 2013). As Brandy explains, she did not want to go through them, which is why she is preparing for them, as presented in the previous chapter. She goes through all those surgeries because only the “sublime figure of the mutilated body redeems the authenticity of the world” (SLADE, 2009, p. 72). However, the mutilations she goes through are to make her into a beautiful woman, and with Shannon’s beauty as a starting point, she reaches a level of beauty that is beyond what anyone has experienced before.

Once Brandy reaches such a high level of beauty, such a perfection, we can understand her as sublime in that aspect as well. If we must aspire to look like her, she becomes god-like, an example to be followed. But when Shannon looks at her, she is not only looking at a god-like beauty. She is also looking at her own former features, a double of her former beauty. Brandy goes through many surgeries in order to become as much like Shannon as possible. However, there are details that are simply unchangeable. Brandy’s hands will always be too large. Even when Brandy finishes all her surgeries, she can never truly become the perfect double to Shannon. There is a final step that is simply impossible to overcome. Even though Shane is Shannon’s sibling, Brandy will never be Shannon’s clone. Baudrillard compares cloning to “the abolition of all otherness and of the entire imaginary sphere” (BAUDRILLARD, 2009, p. 132). Considering this, we can see Brandy’s transformation as an attempt to reach that point, even if it might be just out of reach. That is the source of uncanniness in Brandy. Try as she might, she will never be a perfect double, a clone.

When Baudrillard discusses cloning, he states the same as Shannon, even if coming from different starting points. Baudrillard (2009) maintains that the repetition of products and of bodies makes them lose their uniqueness, their authenticity, which is what Brandy is looking for. Palahniuk discusses this openly in his novel, by way of putting those words in Shannon's speech:

The thing about being cloned from all those shampoo commercials, well, that goes for me and Brandy Alexander, too. Shotgunning anybody in this room would be the moral equivalent of killing a car, a vacuum cleaner, a Barbie doll. Erasing a computer disk. Burning a book. Probably that goes for killing anybody in the world. We're all such products. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 12)

Baudrillard's theories about cloning might not have come to pass yet, but they are very applicable to the fashion world of the novel, just as to today's social media culture. It is possible to use makeup, Photoshop or a filter to look however one might want. There are even people who get plastic surgeries to look like a celebrity or like Barbie.

We see this repetition in different ways throughout the story. Not only are the houses and items "a copy of a copy of a copy" (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 14) but the narrative itself also presents repetitions of sentences and structures. We have the repetition of a photographer's command throughout Shannon's narrative (such as the passages from the novel that serve as epigraphs for the sections in this thesis), and also the repetition of certain important sentences, used in nearly the same exact way. When Shannon gets to the supermarket, the very first place she visits after leaving the hospital, she gets overwhelmed by the colors: "All that color. A whole shift in the beauty standard so that no one thing really stands out. The total being less than the sum of its parts." (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 54) Which is already, in part, a repetition from when Evie tells Shannon that she should not be dating someone as beautiful as herself:

Evie says that beautiful people should never date each other. Together, they just don't generate enough attention. Evie says there's a whole shift in the beauty standard when they're together. You can feel this, Evie says. When both of you are beautiful, neither of you is beautiful. Together, as a couple, you're less than the sum of your parts. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 39)

Which is also repeated by Shannon when she is describing Brandy: "Just by herself, Brandy Alexander is such a shift in the beauty standard that no one thing stands out. Not even you." (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 58) Another phrase we see repeated in the book is the one about beauty and power. The first time it appears, in the first pages of the story, when Shannon is

discussing the power struggle during the scene at the wedding, with Evie's wedding dress all burned up and Brandy shot and bleeding. "It's all *mirror, mirror on the wall* because beauty is power, the same way money is power the same way a gun is power." (p. 16) And then, near the end of the story, we get nearly the same sentence: "Because beauty is power the way money is power the way a loaded gun is power." (p. 229) Another repetition is in the characters. Brandy and Evie wish to look like Shannon; both Brandy and Evie are trans; all three (Shannon, Brandy and Evie) had some sort of sexual relationship with Manus; characters have different names through the story, but end up being the same person; people change names as Brandy gives them new ones to match a new backstory; Shannon sets fire to Evie's house twice.

As discussed in 2.3, Burke's sublime can also be achieved by repetition. Taking that into account, we can include repetition in the categories of things that are used in repetition in the novel, as it serves a dual purpose: it contributes to Brandy's sublime and to the hyperreal tone of the narrative.

This master bathroom is paneled in pink mirror, every wall, even the ceiling. Princess Brandy and I are everywhere, reflected on every surface. You can see Brandy sitting on the pink counter at one side of the vanity sink, me sitting at the other side of the sink.

One of us is sitting on each side of all the sinks in all the mirrors. There are just too many Brandy Alexanders to count, and they're all being the boss of me. They all open their white calfskin clutch bags, and hundreds of those big ring-beaded Brandy Alexander hands take out new copies of the Physicians' Desk Reference with its red cover, big as a Bible. [...]

I shake ten capsules out, and a hundred hands toss a thousand tranquilizers onto the red carpet tongues of those Plumbago mouths. A suicide load of Darvon slides down into the dark interior of the continents that make up a world of Brandy Alexander. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 28-30)

These excerpts show not only the surreal-toned hyperreal narrative, but also how much Shannon sees of Brandy. Brandy expands during that passage, and, in the end, she becomes the whole world. We see something similar in another passage:

Brandy she just talked and talked. We were running out of air, she talked so much, and I don't mean just we, Brandy and me. I mean the world. The world was running out of air, Brandy talked that much. The Amazon Basin just could not keep up. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 173)

Brandy *is* so much, that nothing can keep up with her, not even the air, which she consumes in an apparently never-ending stream of words. "Bigger and prettier than ever, looking regal and annoyed and put-upon as if this is all a big joke, Brandy Alexander lifts a

giant hand and looks at her watch.” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 278) Shannon sees Brandy as larger than life – so much so that in her telling us about Brandy, we can nearly see Brandy, reigning supreme over the whole world.

Shannon spots Brandy’s divinity straight from the first time she saw her. And we can imagine how shocking it must have been for her, seeing someone looking so much like her, but even more beautiful, especially when she is so focused on beauty.

The nurse was leading me around by my elbow for exercise, and as we came around this one corner, just inside the open office doorway, boom, Brandy Alexander was just so there, glorious in a seated Princess Alexander pose, in an iridescent Vivienne Westwood cat suit changing colors with her every move.

Vogue on location. [...]

Brandy Alexander and the way she looked turned the rest of the world into virtual reality. She changed color from every new angle. She turned green with my one step. Red with my next. She turned silver and gold and then she was dropped behind us, gone. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 43-44)

Brandy’s looks are so overwhelmingly good that Shannon immediately remarks that the rest of the world became *less real*, after all, after living for her whole life in a world where that kind of beauty was reserved only to magazines and television, she is now experiencing it in flesh and blood. If we live in a world of simulacra, where the referentials are already lost, how is it even possible to see someone *that* beautiful? The second time Shannon sees Brandy, Shannon compares her to a god:

The nurse leads me past in my cardboard slippers, my tight bandages and deep funk, and Brandy Alexander looks up at the last possible instant and winks. God should be able to wink that good. Like somebody taking your picture. Give me joy. Give me fun. Give me love.

Flash.

Angels in heaven should blow kisses the way Brandy Alexander does and lights up the rest of my week. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 47)

Except, Brandy is already *better* than God. Angels could not make Shannon feel as good as Brandy does. The excerpt below refers to the third time the two meet, right after Shannon steals the turkey at the supermarket:

Between me and them is the speech therapist office and when I go to duck inside, there’s Brandy Alexander for the third time. The queen of everything good and kind is wearing this sleeveless Versace kind of tank dress with this season’s overwhelming feel of despair and corrupt resignation. Body conscious yet humiliated. Buoyant but crippled. The queen supreme is the most beautiful anything I’ve ever seen so I just vogue there to watch from the doorway. [...] Brandy is so attractive you could chop

her head off and put it on blue velvet in the window at Tiffany's and somebody would buy it for a million dollars. (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 56-57)

Shortly after that, while Brandy says Shannon is “*so* Godawful ugly” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 57), Shannon is basically hypnotized. “Brandy’s voice, I barely hear what she says. At that instant, I just adore Brandy so much. Everything about her feels as good as being beautiful and looking in a mirror. Brandy is my instant royal family. My only everything to live for.” (p. 57) Shannon is already *adoring* Brandy as her goddess after only seeing her 3 times and never even speaking to her.

Brandy’s sublime beauty attracts the other characters, making them revolve around her, as moons around the planet Brandy Alexander. Their lives, shaped by Brandy’s gravity, are never boring, as Brandy believes that “[t]he most boring thing in the entire world,’ Brandy says, ‘is nudity.’ The second most boring thing, she says, is honesty. [...] The third most boring thing in the entire world is your sorry-assed past.” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 112). And Brandy never lets them have any of these things.

5 Final remarks (or the future is just wasted on some people)

Give me peace.

Flash.

Give me release.

(Chuck Palahniuk)

As I take a deep breath in order to start presenting the closing remarks here, I struggle with trying to add even more ideas to the discussion. It is not in my nature to write endings, as opposed to being concise, for instance. What I truly want to say is that even if I had another two years, I do not believe I would have read and thought and discussed all the topics I wished to discuss here. The truth is, I feel like I could write this forever. However, such is the nature of research and deadlines – eventually, one must accept one’s work as done for the time being and put it out into the world.

Analyzing fiction from Baudrillard’s perspective was an overwhelming experience: it is very hard to assume that there is no reality (everything is hyperreal, right?) and approaching the novel’s fictional reality to our reality ultimately made me unsure about whether that there is a reality at all – that’s what you get when spending so much time with Baudrillard and Palahniuk. All I am saying is that I hope my dives into fictional reality, our shared reality and hyperreality did not leave anyone else as dizzy as it left me.

If reading this thesis eventually leaves anyone questioning their existence, know that I am sorry.

Well, not really. Because then, now you are in the same boat as me. I know, it sucks here. But it is also full of wonders and things to think about.

My selected corpus of analysis is a novel titled *Invisible Monsters*. It is fairly easy to make the case that Shannon is an invisible monster. She articulates that in two different ways: one, before, when she was beautiful on the outside but internally monstrous and could not get the attention of those she loved; and later, when she externalizes her monstrosity and becomes invisible to society. However, the book’s title is *Invisible Monsters*, plural, so the easiest answer is not the only one we should be looking at. Brandy’s case for being an invisible monster is also relatively easy to make. While still going by Shane, we see him being sexually abused and thrown out of the house because of his assumed queerness, which also made it so that with only

a phone call, his parents believed that he had died of AIDS. His presumed queerness was enough to turn him invisible even to his parents, those who were supposed to love him the most. Meanwhile, Evie's openness to her parents about being transgender made her an outsider to her own family, put in a house to live alone, and later to be married off "to some jackass" (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 268). Not only is Evie invisible to her parents, but she is also invisible to her best friend, Shannon, who spent years beside Evie and never paid enough attention to realize she was trans. Lastly, Manus' invisibility is similar to Evie's, his queerness being ignored by everyone, including himself, everyone pretending they did not know or trying not to acknowledge it. It is unclear if Manus is completely aware of his own sexuality, being that he did abuse Shane when he was young, but later seems to have felt some kind of attraction towards Shannon, Evie and Brandy. His sexuality is, of course, his own, but it is evident in the narrative that he struggles with it, especially when he can no longer attract other men. He becomes invisible to the ones he wishes to attract, and the more he tries to be seen, by using smaller and smaller Speedos, the more he is ignored.

All our characters' monstrosities are connected to their expressions of sexuality – being transgender, gay, or violently denying their type of gender performance – and so are the reasons for their invisibility. They are invisible to society because their monstrosities represent what that society wants to suppress, which is what monsters are meant to do, as discussed with the support of Cohen's (1996) theories. Society wants to suppress their gender performances because it threatens the status quo, the current system's prescription of how their lives should develop. When they refuse to fulfill the expected "get married, have kids, accumulate wealth and die" pattern of life, they refuse the system's logic, representing a philosophical break with the established order. While we know that society has become more inclusive of the queer community for the past decades, it is still an inclusivity that presupposes a certain type of acceptance of the established rules. Halberstam's (2005; 2018) argument that the acceptance of the queer community comes tied with the wish of corporations to sell is also crucial for the discussion proposed throughout this thesis. Be that by marketing themselves as inclusive companies, or by selling drugs and cosmetic surgeries to make those people feel accepted, or rather feel like they need medical intervention to feel accepted. In their need to be loved and to be authentic, Brandy and Shannon – and, to some extent, Evie and Manus as well – go to extremes, turning them into monsters.

Their actions serve as warnings about our own choices, their monstrosity as a derivative of the Latin word *monere*, “to warn, advise”²⁶. Looking at Brandy we see a warning of what that desire for authenticity can bring if not kept in check. Looking at Shannon we see a warning of what the endless pursuit for attention can bring. While they are warnings, they remain very much human, *fictional* humans, but humans, nonetheless. Their search for something outside the system leads them through the lives of outsiders, through self-mutilation and suffering.

As we look at Shannon mutilating her own face to get rid of her beauty, and at Brandy, going through extensive and invasive surgeries because it was the last thing she wanted, we see different movements of distancing and approximation between them. While they come together in their wish for authenticity, their means are opposed. Shannon’s experience was always one of being first and foremost a beautiful person, being a model put her in the spotlight, being beautiful always made everyone look at her appearance. However, she craves attention in another form, she craves her parents’ approval and Manus’ love, both of which she could never quite get. Meanwhile, Shane craved his sister’s love, so much so that he turns himself into a copy of her, even if “becoming a woman” entails difficult and demanding procedures Shane is not willing to go through. To try and achieve what they yearn for, they go in different directions, but with the same intent. What they want is authenticity, but their means of getting to it are diametrically opposed.

Their paths to authenticity lead them to monstrousness – Shannon in a very much physical way, and Brandy in a more categorical way. While Shannon sees the only way for her to become invisible is becoming physically deformed, Brandy becomes invisible by being transgender, by defying categorization. It is their relationship with beauty that pushes them towards becoming monsters. Because of their search for authenticity, they struggle against the imposed rules of beauty and gender. Both are at the liminal point, at the edge of society’s rules, struggling against that flexible barrier that seems to change just when you think you’re getting out, because, as Brandy said, there is no escaping the system that builds our way of understanding the world. “Anything you can do is boring and old and perfectly okay. You’re safe because you’re so trapped inside your culture. Anything you can conceive of is fine because

²⁶ Meaning of the infinitive word *moneo* extracted from Wiktionary, retrieved April 17, 2023: <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/moneo#Latin>

you can conceive of it. You can't imagine any way to escape.” (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 219) The search for authenticity is itself inside the system, the wish to leave the system is programmed by it. The way they find to be free of it is by pushing in a single spot. Making the biggest mistake they could think of.

For a beautiful woman, living off her beauty, that mistake is mutilating herself so badly that she could die from it at any time. Not only does Shannon believe in Wolf's (2002) beauty myth, but she also lives by it. As a model, she is a part of that industry, imposing beauty as a gender performance. For her to take away her own beauty is for her to deny her own performance of womanhood. And when she takes that away, she shoots herself out of society's designated category. She becomes monstrous because we understand her act as monstrous. She blows up society's pressure to conform to the beauty standard (which she herself was), making her body a purely cultural body. Not only was her beauty a socially constructed ideal, but rebellion is precisely against the culture that built it, since she herself represents and reinforces that culture.

Meanwhile, Shane's mistake is in the opposite direction. Shane's escape is to become Brandy, someone more than beautiful. Shane moves away from his own gender performance, but towards another one. In Brandy, we see an extreme performance of femininity, focused on beauty and on over-the-top sexual attributes. Brandy's femininity performance has everything to do with a wish to be seen rather than a wish to be a woman, since Brandy herself says that not only she does not want to be a woman, but she has no real interest in any gender or sexuality for herself. What she truly wants is authenticity, and she will do whatever she must to achieve it. Even become a monster.

In her search for beauty, for authenticity, for that one point where she could pressure enough to finally reach some sort of action, thought, performance, that was not already predicted inside society's structure, she reaches the sublime. By reaching for something no human had done before, she becomes a sort of goddess, too beautiful to be real. By fighting against her reality, she reaches another level, she becomes a vision, too good to be true. By embodying beauty, she makes reality itself shift around her and become less real.

Brandy's search for authenticity can be explained by Agamben's (1993) theory that in postmodernity, there is little to no actual experience in our lives, we live by proxy. We live through television and movies and literature. Through social media. Most of us produce no actual material things, and those of us who produce them, usually produce things that are meant

to sell, not to be actually used. Nearly every aspect of our lives is mediated by machines. Machines plant the food we eat, harvest it, clean it, and calculate how much it costs. Most preparation of food is also dependent on some sort of machine, and, if I want, I can use a machine to ask someone to prepare that food for me. In that case, someone else will use another machine to get the food to me. There are so many steps in a process that, until fairly recently, most people would do entirely by themselves, or in small groups, from beginning to end. Most things we consume we do not even know where they came from. The fruits you eat were probably grown several hundreds, if not thousands of kilometers away. Where was the water you should be drinking right now collected? As discussed from Baudrillard's viewpoint (1994), our experiences have so many mediators that we live in a hyperreality, so many orders of simulacra between us and any real meaning, that it is nearly impossible for us to trace that meaning back to its origin. In their search for that lost meaning, Ng (2009) defends, Brandy and Shannon use self-mutilation as a way to find real experiences within themselves.

In the end, with their approximations and distancing, be they in their relationship with beauty, their own monstrosity, or each other, Shannon and Brandy are looking for each other's love and acceptance. This novel is, among other things, a love story between two siblings. We see that in the very last words of the book: "Completely and totally, permanently and without hope, forever and ever I love Brandy Alexander. And that's enough." (PALAHNIUK, 1999, p. 297) It is only when Shannon learns to love her brother, now Brandy, that she can move on with her life. That is when she lets go of her bitterness towards Brandy, Evie and Manus. Only love can save them. Except this is a bittersweet ending. Shannon leaves her former life to Brandy, giving her everything she had, and goes off to live a quiet life. Her one and only proof of love to Brandy is going away, effectively dying.

Our characters are very much human monsters, as well as human-made monsters. There is no allegory to them, no vampire sucking blood, nor ghosts back to haunt those who wronged them. They are humans who are simply trying to be something different. What they turn out to be is very much a human product, a by-product of our culture and society. Brandy is a monster, but she is also human, with no allegories, no fictional creature representing some other human desire, because she herself is human and human desire. Brandy's monstrosity is not metaphorical, because everything else around her, and around us, is already hyperreal. Her struggles do not *represent* our struggles, because they *reflect* them. Shannon's monstrous act of blowing her face off is only monstrous because it could happen in our non-fictional world,

and her moral failings, her self-centeredness and lack of empathy, are only monstrous because we all know someone who resembles her in these aspects. Manus' monstrosity is in his failure to admit his sexuality and accept himself as he is. Evie's monstrous acts are all in pursuit of what Shannon has, her beauty, her clothes, her boyfriend. All of these characters show us what we are, but with the pedal to the metal. Their direct representation of society works as fiction because fiction is a type of simulacrum, and, in our hyperreality, as Baudrillard (1994) states, quoting Ecclesiastes, "[t]he simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none." (p. 1) Because truth is the second most boring thing in the entire world, according to Brandy, and she is the one that makes the rules, because, as a close reading of *Invisible Monsters* will evidence, we are all living in the world that is Brandy Alexander.

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