

CHUCK PALAHNIUK: THE LIMITS OF ADAPTATION AND THE LOGIC OF INTERNAL CINEMA

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This article examines the interaction between Chuck Palahniuk's prose and cinema, considering both realized adaptations and unrealized or potential film projects, as well as identifying cinematic principles structurally embedded in his texts. Particular attention is given to "Fight Club" as a key case of adaptation, compared with less coherent or unrealized versions. The study argues that the boundary between filmed and unfilmed cinema in Palahniuk's work is fundamentally unstable, as his prose functions as a form of internal cinema, structured through principles of montage, visual organization, and effects of presence.

Key words: *Chuck Palahniuk; adaptation; internal cinema; cinematicity of prose; montage; visuality; narrative strategies.*

Introduction

In recent decades, the problem of the relationship between literature and cinema has become increasingly significant in light of the ongoing transformation of media culture, within which the boundaries between text, image, and spectacle have grown ever more permeable. Chuck Palahniuk's work offers especially revealing material in this regard, since his prose is intrinsically oriented toward visual effects, montage-like fragmentation, and mediated forms of representation, which makes it particularly responsive to the process of screen adaptation.

The scholarly novelty of this study lies in the fact that Palahniuk's work is examined not only in relation to completed film adaptations, but also from the perspective of unfilmed and potential cinema, including projects that were never realized on screen as well as novels whose internal structure is shaped by the logic of cinematic language.

The central hypothesis of the study is that, in Palahniuk's case, the boundary between filmed and unfilmed cinema is ultimately conditional, since his texts function as medial constructions that already contain an inherent cinematic logic.

The aim of this article is to explore how Palahniuk's prose engages with cinema both through actual adaptations and through the internal structure of the texts themselves. To this end, the study analyzes "Fight Club" as a key case of successful adaptation, compares it with less successful or unrealized screen versions, and considers the writer's later novels as forms of "internal cinema". The methodological framework combines hermeneutic and intermedial approaches with elements of narratological and cultural analysis.

Main Part

David Fincher's 1999 adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk's novel "Fight Club" (1996) occupies a distinctive place within the writer's body of work, as it was the first to bring Palahniuk's poetics into the realm of mass spectacle, thereby establishing a perspective through which even those texts that were never adapted for the screen may subsequently be interpreted. What is at stake here is not the question of "fidelity to the original", but a more complex process – the translation of the novel's specific narrative structure into the language of visual culture, where montage, advertising aesthetics, and voice-over function as equivalents of Palahniuk's fragmented prose and its rhythmic intensity [11: 89-90]. Already in Palahniuk's original text, the subject is presented as an unstable, fragmented structure, lacking a coherent core and constituted through external systems of signs. In the film, this idea acquires an explicitly visual form: the unnamed narrator appears literally "assembled" from consumer objects that are catalogued and aestheticized. His well-known statement – "I wasn't the only slave to my nesting instinct. The

people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue” [14: 43] – is amplified in the cinematic version through visual sequences in which the interior space and the protagonist’s body become interchangeable elements within a single system. In this sense, the subject in “Fight Club” can be understood as an effect of consumer discourse – a kind of “catalog self” that exists only within the space of representation [11: 84-89].

The central paradox of the film, however, lies in the fact that the attempt to break out of this system is carried out by means that themselves belong to it. Tyler Durden, who appears as a figure of radical negation, does not offer a genuine alternative but merely pushes to the extreme the very logics that produce the subject’s original emptiness. His language, composed of rhythmically structured and easily memorable phrases, is formally akin to the advertising discourse he ostensibly rejects. As a result, the film’s anti-capitalist impulse is internally undermined: rather than dismantling the system, the protest reproduces it in an inverted form [4: 53].

The body becomes the key mediator of this contradiction. In A. Grønstad’s interpretation, corporeality in “Fight Club” functions as a “last reserve of reality” to which the subject turns under conditions of total simulation; yet this return is fundamentally ambivalent. Pain and physical impact, which are meant to affirm existence, simultaneously become a repeatable ritual and thus lose their authenticity [8]. In this context, violence ceases to operate as an act of resistance and instead assumes a communicative function, replacing language and social bonds. Consequently, bodily practice does not lead the subject beyond the system but merely relocates it within a different mode of subjection – one structured by discipline, repetition, and collective ritual.

Closely connected to this is the motif of the crisis of masculinity, widely recognized in criticism as one of the film’s central themes. The film registers the erosion of traditional models of male identity, brought about by the disappearance of patriarchal structures and the transformation of labor in post-industrial society. Under these conditions, the fraternity of the fight club emerges as an attempt to reconstruct a lost male community grounded in bodily experience, pain, and hierarchy. Yet, as J. Craine

argues, this model does not restore identity but rather hyperbolizes its crisis, pushing the idea of “authentic masculinity” to its limit and thereby exposing its internal instability [6: 291].

No less significant is the film’s narrative level, where a strategy of systematically undermining the viewer’s trust is at work. The narrator in “Fight Club” is not merely unreliable; he is structurally incapable of producing a truthful account, since he himself constitutes a site of rupture. As E. Anderson observes, the film operates as the film of lies, in which illusion is not an external deception but forms the very fabric of the narrative [1: 84]. The final revelation does not dissolve this illusion but merely renders it visible, demonstrating that both the subject and his story are from the outset constructed as an effect of montage – as the result of superimposed, incompatible perspectives.

In this sense, Fincher’s adaptation does not simply interpret Palahniuk’s novel but brings to light its latent cinematicity. Fragmentation, repetition, the use of false leads, and the play with perception characteristic of Palahniuk’s prose find in cinema not merely an adequate but an intensified equivalent. For this reason, “Fight Club” can be regarded as a key text for understanding Palahniuk’s relationship with cinema more broadly: the film does not complete the novel but opens up a way of reading his later prose as inherently oriented toward visual and media forms. From this perspective, the boundary between filmed and unfilmed cinema becomes fundamentally blurred, as Palahniuk’s texts themselves function as projects of potential adaptation, already structured by the logic of spectacle, montage, and mediated effect.

Thus, in Fincher’s interpretation, “Fight Club” represents a rare instance in which adaptation not only preserves but intensifies the philosophical and aesthetic complexity of the source text, emerging as an autonomous artistic statement. It is precisely here that a particular mode of interaction between literature and cinema takes shape – one in which cinema does not illustrate the novel but reveals its latent structural possibilities, pushing its inherent cinematicity to its limit.

However, the subsequent history of adaptations of Palahniuk’s work demonstrates that such an outcome is by no means typical. The next major attempt to bring his prose to the screen – “Choke” (2008) – reveals a

different adaptation strategy and, consequently, a different artistic result. Whereas “Fight Club” achieved a coherent visual and conceptual system, the adaptation of “Choke” tends to preserve the plot while significantly reducing the philosophical and stylistic intensity of the source text. Directed by Clark Gregg, who also authored the screenplay, the film reflects an interpretative approach to Palahniuk’s work, in contrast to “Fight Club”, where the author’s involvement in the script contributed substantially to preserving the internal logic and philosophical density of the original novel. “Choke” premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2008 and was released in U.S. theaters later that autumn. The film stars Sam Rockwell (Victor Mancini), Anjelica Huston (Ida), and Kelly Macdonald (Paige Marshall).

Critical reception was mixed from the outset. According to the review aggregator Metacritic, the film received a score of 47 out of 100 based on 27 reviews [12], placing it in the category of “mixed or average reviews.” This rating alone indicates the generally restrained response of critics.

In his review, Roger Ebert notes that the film possesses a certain sharpness and an element of absurd charm; however, from a dramaturgical standpoint, it appears diffuse and fails to achieve internal coherence. He describes it as a work that moves “not at a resolution but at a rest stop” [7]. While acknowledging Sam Rockwell’s performance as convincing, Ebert points out that the film’s overall structure does not sustain dramatic tension.

The British critic Xan Brooks, writing in *The Guardian*, characterizes the film as a satirical black comedy with elements of grotesque, yet emphasizes its tonal instability and the limitations of its directorial approach [5]. His review suggests that the film fails to match the depth and sharpness of the novel, remaining at the level of a stylized but somewhat superficial adaptation.

In an online review, Christian Sauv  highlights the film’s relative fidelity to the spirit of Palahniuk’s work – particularly in its portrayal of the protagonist’s sexual addiction and its ironic tone – while also noting that the cinematic version simplifies the complexity of the source text and softens its philosophical implications [21]. Thus, three recurring themes emerge in Anglophone criticism: the strength of Sam Rockwell’s

performance; the preservation of the novel's provocative tone; and the insufficient structural and conceptual depth of the adaptation.

When "Choke" is compared with "Fight Club", the difference in their cultural and critical status becomes immediately apparent. Although "Fight Club" was initially received with a degree of restraint, it later attained cult status; its Metascore stands at 67/100 [12], and the film has since been widely discussed in academic and philosophical criticism as a text addressing the crisis of masculinity, consumerism, and identity. The key difference in adaptation strategy lies in the directorial approach. Fincher constructs a visually and conceptually coherent system: editing style, color palette, voice-over, and narrative structure together form a fully realized cinematic language. In contrast, Clark Gregg, while remaining closer to the plot of the novel, does not develop an equally distinct visual or philosophical framework in "Choke". The adaptation preserves the narrative lines but does not transform them into an autonomous cinematic system.

Moreover, "Fight Club" intensifies the philosophical subtext of the source material, whereas "Choke" foregrounds its comic and sexually provocative elements. As a result, the 2008 adaptation is perceived as competent yet less ambitious and less radical in comparison with the 1999 film.

In interviews, Clark Gregg emphasized that his intention was to preserve the emotional core of the novel and the character of its protagonist, rather than to produce a visually shocking film [2]. However, it is precisely this refusal of a radical stylistic approach that contributed to the film remaining in the shadow of Palahniuk's more large-scale and conceptually cohesive adaptation. At the same time, this situation did not lead Palahniuk to distance himself from cinematic language. On the contrary, a few years later he returned to cinema – now from a different position and with a different strategy.

In 2015, reports emerged regarding a planned adaptation of the novel "Lullaby", with Palahniuk announcing his involvement in writing the screenplay [3]. In 2016, the project was launched as a crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter with a stated goal of \$250,000 [9]. The campaign reached its funding target ahead of schedule [20]. Thus, Palahniuk

emerges not merely as a source of literary material but as an active participant in both the production and screenwriting stages of the project.

Significantly, following the moderate success of *Choke*, the author does not distance himself from cinema; on the contrary, he seeks to increase his degree of control over the adaptation process. Whereas in the 2008 film he remained outside the directorial framework, the *Lullaby* project entails his more direct involvement in script development. In interviews related to the campaign, Palahniuk emphasizes the need to reshape the text in accordance with cinematic dynamics and reflects on the challenges of translating the novel's central motif into film language [18].

It may be suggested that what emerges here is a characteristic feature of Palahniuk's authorial position: repetition not as regression, but as a form of correction. If the adaptation of "*Choke*" failed to convey the philosophical depth that critics identified in the novel, then the "*Lullaby*" project can be understood as a more author-controlled process. This is not merely a continuation of collaboration with the film industry, but an attempt to reconfigure the integration of his own text within the media environment.

It is also noteworthy that Palahniuk's later novels increasingly engage with cinematic imagination: montage-like fragmentation, abrupt transitions between episodes, and the scenaristic compactness of dialogue. Even in cases where no adaptation is realized, the internal structure of the text reveals a clear orientation toward visual dynamism. In this sense, the shift toward "*Lullaby*" as a film project does not constitute an external episode in the author's biography, but rather forms part of the logic of his aesthetic evolution.

Particularly indicative in this context is the adaptation project of the novel "*Snuff*" (2008), which at a certain stage was in active development and even reached a concrete level in terms of casting and directorial concept. In the early 2010s, plans were announced for a film adaptation to be directed by Fabien Martorell; the project attracted a cast including Daryl Hannah, Thora Birch, and Tom Sizemore [22].

The plot of the novel, centered on the porn star Cassie Wright, who seeks to set a record by engaging in sexual encounters with six hundred men over the course of a single day of filming, establishes from the outset

an extreme degree of bodily and spectacular radicalism, calling into question the very possibility of its adequate cinematic representation [19].

It is characteristic that, already at the stage of the project's discussion, critics and journalists raised the issue of the material's fundamental "unfilmability." Any attempt to transfer the text to the screen would inevitably require either a radical softening of its content – thereby effectively undermining its semantic structure – or, conversely, the preservation of its provocative corporeality, which would push the film beyond the limits of what is permissible in mainstream distribution. As noted in one review, the very premise of "Snuff" implies such a degree of explicitness that its culmination is "enough to guarantee an X rating" [Ibid.].

In this sense, the fate of the project proves symptomatic. Despite the existence of a screenplay, a director, and a cast, the film was never realized as a full theatrical release. This case makes it possible to speak of a boundary at which the interaction between Palahniuk's prose and cinema encounters the institutional and cultural constraints of the industry itself: a text that functions in literature as a form of radical satire and critique of spectacle becomes, in cinema, either unacceptable or subject to substantial reduction.

Thus, "Snuff" represents not merely an "unrealized adaptation," but a specific type of film project that exists at the boundary between the possible and the impossible within mass visual culture. If "Fight Club" demonstrates a successful translation of Palahniuk's poetics into the language of cinema, and "Choke" its partial adaptation, then "Snuff" exposes the limits of this translation, marking the point at which the very logic of the text proves incompatible with the conditions of cinematic production and distribution.

Following both successful and unsuccessful adaptation attempts, Palahniuk increasingly relocates cinema into the internal structure of the novel itself. This is particularly evident in "Snuff", where cinema is no longer an external medium but becomes the very theme, setting, and organizing principle of the narrative. The concept of "snuff," commonly associated with the visual recording of extreme violence, is understood here as a form of representation in which murder is transformed into

spectacle and commodity; accordingly, scholars have linked it to the logic of “murder as sexual entertainment” [10: 40-59]. In this sense, Palahniuk’s novel operates at the intersection of transgressive prose and cinematic imagination, pushing to its limit the very question of the boundary between staging and reality.

At the center of the novel is the porn actress Cassie Wright, who seeks not only to “make history” [15: 4] but to “make a snuff movie” [Ibid.], transforming her own death into the culmination of a large-scale media project. The very composition of the text is organized according to principles of montage: the narrative unfolds through the voices, memories, and observations of multiple characters, while the author, following his own technique of “hiding the I” of the narrator and consistently “keep your camera pointed elsewhere, describing other characters” [13: 62], effectively simulates the operation of a filming apparatus. It is no coincidence that the action is set within a studio space, where six hundred men wait their turn before the cameras, each arriving not only as a participant in the erotic marathon but also as a bearer of personal illusion, trauma, or fantasy.

Most importantly, however, “Snuff” is not limited to the exploitation of shock material. Beneath its radically provocative premise lies a narrative about the transformation of human life into a script, and of death into a final shot. When Branch Bacardi declares, “Didn’t one of us on purpose set out to make a snuff movie” [15: 188], the novel reaches the point at which cinematic logic no longer merely represents violence but begins to govern the very fate of its characters. The ending, in which “With the billion volts of power still pulsing into Bacardi... the cameras rolling...” [Ibid.: 154], articulates this idea with particular clarity: in Palahniuk’s work, spectacle does not reflect reality but absorbs it. For this reason, “Snuff” is crucial for understanding the writer’s later prose: here, the novel itself functions as an extreme cinematic project – internally spectacular, montage-driven, and at the same time resistant to full realization as a film.

If in “Snuff” cinema appears as a space of extreme spectacle, where life is transformed into a final shot, then in the novel “Tell-All” Palahniuk shifts attention to another level – the very mechanism of producing the star

image. Here cinema is no longer important as a shocking event, but as a system that fabricates biography, appearance, memory, and destiny. The novel is constructed as an explicitly screenplay-like structure: it is divided into acts and scenes and saturated with stage directions that imitate the language of cinema and theatre – “to break the fourth wall” [16: 10, 107], “dissolve into flashback” [Ibid.: 17, 47, 95], “voice-over” [Ibid.: 80, 81, 82, 91, 93, 98, 99, 104 etc.], “Cut. Print it. Roll credits” [Ibid.: 140]. In this way, Palahniuk does not merely introduce a cinematic theme but builds the novel itself as a script internally oriented toward montage, shifts of perspective, and visual dynamism. It is no coincidence that in “Consider This” he explicitly recommends ending “one scene and jump to a flashback, alternating between the past and present” [13: 31, 32], while also emphasizing that “a nonfiction form will allow you to make even the most fantastic, the most maudlin, the most silly story seem completely plausible” [Ibid.: 51].

At the center of the novel lies not so much the Hollywood diva Katherine Kenton as the figure of her creator and double, Hazie Coogan, who transforms another person’s life into a carefully directed project. In this sense, “Tell-All” inherits not only the Hollywood myth but also a Wildean model of artificially produced beauty: Hazie does not separate herself from her creation, and the story of the star becomes a form of aesthetic montage in which authenticity exists only as the effect of a successfully constructed image [23: 121]. Her confession is telling: “My life is far less steered by Katherine Kenton than her life is by me” [16: 11]. In the finale, this hidden authorial control reaches its limit: Hazie does not simply complete another person’s biography but ensures for her heroine “A dramatic exit – after a suitable third act” [Ibid.: 135], saving her from the humiliation of aging and decline.

In “Tell-All”, Palahniuk radicalizes one of his central concerns – the substitution of life with its aesthetically constructed version. If Snuff exposed the transformation of death into spectacle, here the object of analysis becomes the very technology of producing cinematic illusion, in which a person, their past, body, and even memory are subordinated to the logic of the script. The novel thus occupies a crucial place within

Palahniuk's later works, where cinema no longer appears as an object of adaptation but as an internal model of writing.

This trajectory culminates in the novel "The Invention of Sound", where Palahniuk brings the cinematic dimension to its most radical and exposed form by shifting from the visual to the acoustic. While in earlier works spectacle determined the structure of the narrative, here sound emerges as the final bearer of authenticity: "What made all this make-believe garbage real was the sound" [17: 22]. In doing so, Palahniuk intensifies one of the fundamental impulses of cinema: the pursuit of authenticity, of an experience that must be perceived bodily and immediately. It is significant that the protagonist of the novel, sound engineer Mitzi Ives, perceives sound as "the future of motion pictures. Acting beyond acting" [Ibid.], while her professional practice is built around the creation of hyper-realistic acoustic effects. In this respect, Palahniuk effectively extends and radicalizes a well-known principle of cinematic authenticity articulated by Luchino Visconti, who insisted on constructing authentic filming conditions, since "otherwise falseness may appear in the actor's performance, and that is precisely what the viewer will perceive" [24: 62]. However, whereas in Visconti this principle functions as a subtle enhancement of verisimilitude, in Palahniuk it takes on an extreme form: sound must not imitate but literally reproduce the limits of experience – fear, pain, and agony. From this emerges the central premise of the novel: "Only dread and terror brought out a marketable recording." [17: 39]. In a world where the viewer is saturated with visual effects and seeks increasingly intense sensations, cinema shifts into the domain of affect, transforming into an industry of controlled terror. Palahniuk demonstrates how this mechanism dissolves the boundary between fiction and reality: sound, initially intended for cinematic production, begins to demand a real source – and thus real suffering.

The plot, structured around the intersecting trajectories of Mitzi Ives and Foster Gates, follows the same logic of montage as in Palahniuk's earlier works: the characters initially exist in parallel narrative lines, linked by the motif of a missing child, before converging into a single narrative in which a transfer of roles occurs. Foster thus continues Mitzi's practice, inheriting the role she had occupied – that of a figure who was

“an independent contractor, making some writer’s twisted dream come true” [Ibid.: 24]. At the same time, the principle of simulation is pushed to its limit: the characters operate within a space of reflections and substitutions, where “A waitress playing an actress playing a waitress.” [Ibid.: 27], and reality itself becomes dependent on its registration – “If a nose was broken in the forest and no one was there to record it and dub it into a film, did the nose really break?” [Ibid.: 49].

In “The Invention of Sound”, Palahniuk brings his “cinematic” trajectory to completion: if “Snuff” explores the limits of visual spectacle, and “Tell-All” the mechanisms of image production, here he turns to the most fundamental layer of the medium – sensory impact, sound as the carrier of affect and the illusion of authenticity. Cinema in this novel no longer merely reflects reality or constructs it; rather, it produces reality as experience, in which the boundary between art and life becomes completely dissolved.

Conclusion

Thus, the analysis confirms the proposed hypothesis that in Chuck Palahniuk’s work the boundary between filmed and unfilmed cinema proves to be conditional. While the adaptation of “Fight Club” demonstrates the possibility of an adequate translation of his poetics into the language of film, subsequent adaptations and unrealized projects reveal the limits of such translation, whereas the novels themselves increasingly function as forms of internal cinema, structured according to the principles of montage, spectacle, and medial representation. In this sense, Palahniuk’s prose not only interacts with cinema but reinterprets it as a model of writing, shifting the focus from external adaptation to the internal cinematicity of the text. Prospects for further research are connected with a broader examination of intermedial strategies in contemporary literature, as well as with the analysis of texts that are conceived from the outset as medial projects existing at the intersection of word, image, and spectacle.

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ԶԱԿ ՊԱԼԱՆԻԿ. ԷԿՐԱՆԱՎՈՐՄԱՆ ՍԱՀՄԱՆԱԳԻԾԸ ԵՎ ՆԵՐՀԱՅԵՑՈՂԱԿԱՆ ԿԻՆՈՅԻ ՏՐԱՄԱԲԱՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ

**Կ. Ս. ԹՈՎՄԱՍՅԱՆ
ԵՊՀ**

Հոդվածում վերլուծվում է Չակ Պալանիկի արձակի և կինեմատոգրաֆի փոխազդեցությունը՝ ինչպես Էկրանավորումների մակարդակում, այնպես էլ չիրականացված ու պոտենցիալ կինոնախագծերի համատեքստում: Ուսումնասիրվում են նաև նրա տեքստերում կառուցվածքային առումով ներդրված կինեմատոգրաֆիկ սկզբունքները: Հատուկ ուշադրություն է դարձվում «Մարտական ակումբ» ֆիլմին՝ որպես ադապտացիայի

առանցքային օրինակ, որը համադրվում է ավելի պակաս ամբողջական կամ ձախողված տարբերակների հետ: Հիմնավորվում է այն վարկածը, որ Պալանիկի ստեղծագործության մեջ «նկարահանված» և «չնկարահանված» կինոյի սահմանը պայմանական բնույթ է կրում, քանի որ նրա արձակը գործում է որպես «ներքին կինոյի» տեսակ՝ կառուցված մոնտաժայնության, տեսողական կազմակերպման և ներկայության էֆեկտի սկզբունքներով:

Բանալի բառեր: Չակ Պալանիկ, էկրանավորում, ներքին կինո, արձակի կինոպատկերավորություն, ադապտացիա, մոնտաժ, վիզուալություն, պատումի ռազմավարություններ:

ЧАК ПАЛАНИК: ГРАНИЦА ЭКРАНИЗАЦИИ И ЛОГИКА ВНУТРЕННЕГО КИНО

К. С. ТОВМАСЯН

ЕГУ

В статье анализируется взаимодействие прозы Чака Паланика с кинематографом как на уровне экранизаций, так и в перспективе нереализованных и потенциальных кинопроектов, а также через выявление кинематографических принципов, структурно заложенных в его текстах. Особое внимание уделяется фильму «Бойцовский клуб» как ключевому примеру адаптации, сопоставляемому с менее целостными или несостоявшимися версиями. Обосновывается гипотеза о том, что граница между «снятым» и «неснятым» кино в творчестве Паланика носит условный характер, поскольку его проза функционирует как форма «внутреннего кино», выстроенная по принципам монтажности, визуальной организации и эффектов присутствия.

Ключевые слова: Чак Паланик, экранизация, внутреннее кино, кинематографичность прозы, адаптация, монтаж, визуальность, нарративные стратегии.

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