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FACULTY OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Introducing Generation X:
The Main Themes in Douglas Coupland's Generation X and Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club

Diploma thesis

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(thank you!)

Ústí nad Labem, Czech Republic, November 2003

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracoval samostatně a pouze na základě uvedených pramenů a literatury. Souhlasím současně s prezenčním zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

V Ústí nad Labem, 6. listopadu 2003

I declare that the following diploma thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned in the bibliography. I agree with lending of the work for study purposes.

Ústí nad Labem, November 6, 2003

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Note.

This is a second version of the paper, slighlty revisited and reorganized for the purposes of the online presentation. Any comments or complaints are warmly welcome and eagerly awaited, and should be directed straight to my e-mail address.

I would like to use this opportunity to (finally) thank my advisor, Mr. Miroslav Jindra of the Charles University in Prague, for his kind help and incessant support. Modest as he is, Mr. Jindra repeatedly stressed that any form of acknowledgement concerning his person should be left out of the diploma thesis. That's why I had to find some other way of expressing my deep appreciation (and hopefully, as we speak, his personal copy of Chuck Palahniuk's Survivor is already on its way to my mailbox to be presented to him shortly..).

I would also like to thank my friend David Kern who came up with the original idea for this work, some time ago, somewhere in the interim between the two of our big journeys. Yes, David, we will do the Iceland voyage soon!

Of course, there are others without whom...

You know who you are.

flp.

Brandýs nad Orlicí, Dec 27, 2003

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1. Introduction

There is a famous and widespread literary term describing a specific group of Americans who stayed in Europe after the World War I. They shared the same conditions, their everyday experiences and they felt a strong urge to express their doubts and fears in writing. Nowadays, the group of authors is known as the Lost Generation and includes such names as Ernest Hemingway, Francis Scott Fitzgerald or Gertrude Stein (who apparently coined the term).

Another significant group which later earned its common name - yet, this time thanks to shared sociological circumstances, rather than literary achievements - was formed after the World War II. Its members lived in relatively happy times, surrounded by new technological inventions, sharing a great hope for the certainly brighter future and enjoying the steadily growing economy. Since they also surrounded themselves with a considerable number of newborn children, they became identified by the term Baby Boomers.

Towards the end of the 1980's, however, a new generation of Americans began to outgrow their parents. Suddenly the familiar feeling of satisfaction seemed to disappear and what the "twentysomethings" experienced was once again tainted with lostness and disillusion, only this time the context was different. If in the 1920's the frustration came from the experience of the War, in the 1990's the main danger dwelled in the trenches of consumerism and the shallowness of omnipresent TV reality. Anyhow, the spiritual damage was comparable. And the generation needed to be named.

A novel which subsequently offered a definition for the new lost generation was written by Canadian author Douglas Coupland in the year 1991 and was called Generation X. Five years later Chuck Palahniuk published his first book Fight Club which explored existential issues troubling the same age group but from a different perspective.

The aim of this work is to introduce the above mentioned authors and their debut novels by providing a detailed analysis of both Generation X and Fight Club. The following comparison will then focus on the main themes featured in both books and comment on the differences as well as similarities concerning the plot, narrative techniques and the overall cultural context.

Eventually, Coupland's original coinages from Generation X will be listed alphabetically in the appendix to further illustrate the spirit, philosophy and social customs of the generation which possesses its name, yet still remains somewhat undefined and unlabelled.

2.1. Biography of Douglas Coupland

Douglas Campbell Coupland was born on December 30, 1961 on a Canadian military base in Baden-Söllingen, Germany to Canadian parents Douglas Charles Thomas and C. Janet Coupland. At the time, his father worked at the NATO base as a doctor. Although Charles and Janet originally came from the Eastern Canadian cities of Ottawa and Montreal, after the return from Germany in 1965 they decided to settle in West Vancouver. Douglas, the third of their four boys, was raised there and in 1979 he graduated from Vancouver's Sentinel Secondary School. He continued with the education in his home-town by attending the studio program in sculpture at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design.

After the graduation in 1984 Coupland spent a year at the Hokkaido College of Art and Design, then travelled to Italy to attend the European Design Institute for a course in industrial design, and finally turned his back on arts for some time, studying Japanese business science at the Japan-American Institute of Management in Honolulu, Hawaii. He then worked in Tokyo as a designer but decided to come back to Vancouver to pursue magazine writing. According to the often cited legend he was offered a writing job in a local paper after the editor Malcolm Parry was amused by a series of postcards Coupland had written while living and working in Japan. At the same time he enjoyed his first successes as a sculptor, including a solo exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery entitled "The Floating World" in November 1987.

Coupland's work as a journalist ranged from stories on famous American art dealers to various pieces concerning modern lifestyle. His writings enabled him to finance his artistic visions and ideas, and in the course of time he realized that he was making more living in writing than sculpting. However, he was not very satisfied with the workplace conditions and called the magazine job a "bottom-of-the-food-chain", remembering that the "office cubicles were like veal-fattening pens. There was just no

dignity."[4] The latter definition appeared later in his debut novel as one of many features typical for the now labelled Generation X.

It was on the basis of an article and a full-page cartoon strip in Vista magazine in Toronto that the New York publisher called St. Martin's Press asked Coupland to write a non-fiction guidebook to the rising generation of post baby-boomers. The project was intended to follow the model of the Yuppie Handbook which was published by Marissa Piesman and Marilee Hartley in the autumn of 1984 (the full title was Yuppie Handbook: The State-Of-The-Art Manual for Young Urban Professionals and it was conceived as a satire of the eighties[4]). Instead of keeping to the planned concept of the guidebook, Coupland moved to Palm Springs, California and wrote his first novel – Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture (published in 1991). The story of three friends abandoning life in the city for a quiet retirement community in Palm Springs characterized the generation of people who were born during the 1960's and 1970's, and it immediately earned its author both a critical and popular success, eventually selling over a million copies worldwide.

Apart from becoming an acclaimed novelist, Coupland still remains an active visual artist and award-winnig designer. He has won two Canadian National Awards for Excellence in Industrial Design, held a number of solo art shows both in America and Europe, and recently participated in the exhibition called "The Cover Theory: Contemporary Art as Re-Interpretation" which took place in a former power station in Piacenza, Italy.

As far as his writing career is concerned, Coupland continues to depict lives and problems of his contemporaries, those mostly overeducated but often underemployed members of the Generation X who are struggling to diminish their low career prospects and keep fighting the domination of material comforts on today's society list of values. His eleven books include novels (most recently Hey, Nostradamus!, 2003), essays, two collections of short stories as well as non-fiction. The works have already

been translated into 22 languages and published in 30 countries. As a journalist he guest-edited two special issues of Vancouver Magazine and contributes regularly to the New York Times, the New Republic, Wired, Time magazine, etc.

Douglas Campbell Coupland, the man with great talent for observation and the diligent chronicler of contemporary culture who is "always in the detail-gathering mode,"[3] currently divides his time between West Vancouver, Los Angeles and northern Scotland.

2.2. Major works

Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture (St. Martin's Press, New York 1991)

The novel was originally conceived as a series of fictional dictionary entries which would be presented in a form of a handbook, resembling a computer manual for the members of the X Generation (where the letter X stands for a great unknown or for any adjective properly describing the age group of today's "twentysomethings"). Traces of the original intention can be found along the pages in the form of pop-art cartoons, slogans and summarizing definitions of phrases which were coined by Coupland to capture the atmosphere and situation of the Gen-Xers, or to serve as a helpful tool for those who do not understand the concept from the very start and may not be familiar enough with the subject matter.

The three main protagonists of the book are Andy (who is the narrator), Dag and Claire who fled society to live in a relative peacefullness of Palm Springs. They represent the generation of children born in 1970's and 1980's, now facing the end of the century and already being tired and disgusted by their dysfunctional culture. They work at prospectless McJobs (defined by the author as "low pay, low prestige, low benefits, done grudginly to little applause" *(14)*) and in the spare time share stories to overcome the lack of meaning in their lives as well as the ubiquitous doubts that the future might not necessarily be a better place.

According to Coupland, the stories are important, regardless whether they are real or none of them ever happened. They are essential because "for members of X Generation, it is extremely difficult if not impossible to talk about love or loneliness or fear without worrying about sounding too corny or without worrying about being made fun of because we are all such masters of the art of bitter irony. But obviously we feel these things intensely, and the fact we are not expressing them means that they are all

the more bottled up waiting to explode. Only by telling stories are the characters able to see how they feel."[3]

Some of the fantasies traded among the three friends take place in a mythical place called Texlahoma which is located on an asteroid and where the year is always 1974. Others reverberate ideas of a nuclear Armageddon, as an echo of the cold war world in which we spent our childhoods. The true stories often describe ironic experiences with society, North American culture and its twisted values. As opposed to that, the most precious moments are usually connected with some natural phenomena – Andy travels half the world to witness the total eclipse of the Sun, for instance. Similarly, towards the end of the book he encounters a big white egret flying majestically in the field. Although it grazes his head with its claws and cuts his scalp, Andy percieves the experience as something mystical, real and powerful. It is one of the valuable moments that "define what it's like to be alive on this planet," as one character states on the page 104.

Although it was written at the beginning of the 1990's, the novel covers the time period from the autumn 1999 to the first day of the year 2000. One of the characters who we meet along the way is Tyler, Andy's younger brother, and the main hero of Coupland's second novel Shampoo Planet. Coupland's debut was published in Czech in 1999 (Generace X: vyprávění pro akcelerovanou kulturu. Volvox Globator, Praha).

Shampoo Planet (Pocket Books, New York 1992)

Coupland's second novel confronts the overall idealism of the 1960's with the pure materialism of the second half of the 1980's. Settingwise, it concentrates on the same northamerican environment but approaches it from the opposite perspective. 20-year-old Tyler Johnson lives with his ex-hippie divorced mother in British Columbia and as a teenager faces a world where the countryside is severely damaged, the air is irreversibly polluted and all the career opportunities seem to be destroyed by the

powerful baby boomers. However, unlike the characters in Generation X, Tyler is determined to make the best of his diminishing prospects. He reads young Achiever magazine, carefully protects his room from any traces of decoration that might resemble the past (and therefore calls his room "the Modernarium") and studies the local community college to be prepared for a desired job with generous pension at some multinational high-tech company.

Among Tyler's most valued possessions is an extensive shampoo collection. He and his peers are fascinated by famous brand names, almost poetic descriptions of each product's exclusivness and as proper examples of the global teens they are obssesed with cleanliness and hair perfection. Shampoo Planet illustrates Coupland's talent for exploring the minds and culture of the often cynical young people (even their favourite restaurant is called Toxic Waste Dump) with healing humour and affection. Moreover, it offers a certain optimism which Genration X lacked. Towards the end of the novel Tyler begins searching for his unknown father, his project for turning devastated dumping grounds into amusement parks wins him a respectful position at a local corporation, and he slowly realizes that it is necessary to look for greater meaning in life than just economic prosperity.

Life After God (Pocket Books, New York 1994)

After the second novel Douglas Coupland started searching for another subject matter that would help him investigate further the West Coast suburban culture of constant changes, instant pleasures and instant food, the culture which is surrounded with too much information available but having serious troubles filtering it. At the same time the author searched for his own formal spiritual framework and guidance. "We are the first generation to be raised without religion," claims Coupland whose parents never discussed any spiritual themes and the family did not celebrate religious holidays like Christmas or Easter.[5]

Life After God is a collection of eight related short stories that are linked together with sections in which the main narrator (writing for his daughter) worries about aging and dying. The stories reflect the world that has lost its way, replaced the sense for love and beauty with scorching irony, and instead of spiritual growth via organized religion it stresses the importance of purely material values. The heroes of the stories, however, seek for something more meaningful – if the cynical world around them has lost the way, the answer to this lack of direction is God. The characters often conclude that they suffer from an inability to feel. The angst of adolescence is long gone and now they live their incompatible lives within the same society which they despised a decade ago. It is high time for them to accomplish something worthwhile and Coupland believes that the only solution may come from the religious spheres.

Microserfs (HarperCollins, New York 1995)

Coupland's third novel returns to the mundane world of young computer programmers. In the form of a diary it follows six bright "code writers" who are employed at the most sacred location of contemporary computer business – the Microsoft empire in Redmond, Washington. It is an insight into a specific world with rules and laws of its own "whose only boundaries are television, fast food and e-mail." The serfs, who are completely devoted to their boss Bill (the multimillionaire Bill Gates, that is, functioning almost as a God-like figure in the world where otherwise the thin line separating spirituality and strict commercialism is already blurred), work for 18 hours a day, shop in 24-hour supermarkets for the right sandwiches, and are able to dismiss relationships because their partner simply forgets the one-month anniversary of their first date by making a mistake of NOT programming the desktop calendar to be reminded at the right time.

This particular subculture of diligent hard workers admiring the Windows system because it is the best software and wearing strictly the latest Gap products (probably because it is the best "soft-wear") is brought to us by 26-year old Daniel Underwood, or, to be precise, *daniel.u@microsoft.com*. He and his friends are trapped in a special reality, lingering somewhere between the virtual and the real world, and taking the best advantage of the smart up-to-date technological inventions of the 1990's (PCs, faxes, CDs, modems, ATMs, cell phones, VCRs, credit cards, etc.) that always make life so much easier and faster and better. Later they decide to leave Microsoft and move to Palo Alto, California where they start their own software company and shortly achieve a major success with a computer Lego-style game called Oop! Participating in the creation of a purely commercial product (made exclusively out of zeroes and ones) helps them to come closer to the discovery of their own, and profoundly human identity.

Coupland's intention was to write about a group of young adults who are trying to blend together life and technology. As part of the research for the novel he even lived within the Microsoft community for some time, most of the experiences, ideas and vocabulary are therefore highly authentic.

Girlfriend in a Coma (HarperCollins, New York 1998)

The story was inspired by the case of 21-year-old Karen Ann Quinlan who collapsed after swallowing alcohol and tranquilizers at a party in 1975. She was resuscitated and placed on feeding tubes and a respirator but the brain damage was so severe that the doctors gave her no hope of recovery. She remained in a coma for almost 10 years. Although the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that the parents had the right to end her life, after the respirator was turned off, Quinlan suprisingly continued to breathe, and lived until June 1985 when she died of pneumonia.

In the novel, a Vancouver teenager Karen Ann McNeil lapses into a coma after combining vodka and Valium in 1979, and she recovers again as late as in 1997. Meanwhile, her five close friends experience all the usual existential collapses that so often appear in previous Coupland's works: alienation instead of stable relationships, cultural apathy and career disillusions, occasional drug or alcohol problems and subsequent identity crises. Gradually, they all get involved in jobs for a Hollywood production company and spend their time and energy looking for convenient locations for films and a TV show that resembles the succesful series called X-Files (which deals with supernatural phenomena in Hollywood style and which actually is filmed in Vancouver). However, even this activity does not bring any satisfaction or fullfilment.

After Karen miraculously awakes from the eighteen-year sleep, her friends visit her in the hospital and they list all the important new things and inventions that Karen apparently missed during the big sleep. On the contrary, she notices the progress they achieved during the long period and sadly it is very small, if any. The question is whose "coma" is worse: whether it is the state of being alive but comatose (like Karen) or being virtually comatose while still being alive.

Later in the novel, there is a vivid portrayal of the end of the world where the entire population simply falls asleep and dies, apart from the group of Karen's friends. However, they miss the opportunity to rebuild the world, never once asking what was wrong and why they were chosen to survive. Eventually, the second chance for redemption is given to them at the meeting with the spirit of their dead friend Jared who enables them to return to the same world as it used to be but under the obligation that they should forsake their empty existences to become activists. They are to regain a faith in God or love or anything that will make the Earth a better place again. For wasting our time and lives is clearly the deepest coma imaginable.

All Families Are Psychotic (Bloomsbury Books, New York 2001)

After insightful analyses of various communities, in which the prevailing age would not exceed early adulthood, Coupland now focuses on the genuine cornerstone of every proper society and the most important community of all - a family, spanning his timeline generously across two entire generations. The novel portrays adventures of the largely dysfunctional Drummond family as its various members gather in Orlando, Florida to witness the clan's most normal person, astronaut Sarah, launching into space aboard the space shuttle. The main character, though, is Sarah's mother, Janet. At the age of 65, she abhors people of her own generation who seem to her too passive and detached from life. She spends most of her lonely days surfing the internet (sometimes under the nickname HotAsianTeen to acquiant with people whom she otherwise would not know), and during the visit in Florida she prefers to stay in a cheap motel of a questionable appearance, instead of taking advantage of her daughter's great moment by wasting money on a luxurious hotel, like the rest of the Drummonds.

Apart from the obvious as well as less usual conflincts among the alienated family members, the book also deals with deeper issues. Sarah the astronaut was born without her left hand because her mother Janet took thalidomide while she was pregnant. Now Janet is using the same sedative again, this time treating the symptoms of AIDS. The source of inspiraiton for Sarah's handicap comes straight from Coupland's own family. In 1999, one of his close relatives gave birth to a daughter who was missing a hand, as part of a series of severe birth defects in the Vancouver area, possibly due to the side effects of thalidomide. Coupland felt that he "should write something so when my niece gets older, she can look at it and aspire to something big."[4] His niece Siri may as well be encouraged by the story of Sarah but hopefully she will also learn from the conclusion of the book, where almost everyone clearly suffers from a fatal disease – either mental or physical or emotional. However, the most serious problem of the Drummond family is not AIDS or congenital limb

deformity, it is the devastating lack of life's meaning, and the missing power to cherish relationships.

Hey Nostradamus! (Bloomsbury Books, New York 2003)

The ironic humour behind the intricate family disputes in the previous work is replaced by the deep sense of tragedy in Coupland's latest novel. It is inspired by a news report about the massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado in 1999, in which two teenage killers shot a teacher and 14 of their classmates. Coupland transposes the incident to Delbrook Senior Secondary School in North Vancouver and follows the fate of four people who were either directly or remotely involved in the tragedy. The novel is thus divided into four sections, each being narrated by a distinctly different character. At first, it is Cheryl, the final victim of the gunmen's madness, who speaks in detail about her last few hours on Earth (including the description of a maths class just prior to the shooting) and about the secret marriage to her classmate Jason, who is the second one to continue with the story. After nearly twelve years from the tragical event, he still mourns the loss of his young bride and struggles hard to come to terms with the memories of the massacre. The third part is narrated by his new girlfriend Heather who is trying to help Jason with his trauma, and the novel is concluded with the story of Reg, Jason's fanatically religious father who tortures his family with his ill and twisted fundamentalist views.

The desired effect of the four testimonies is "to highten the sense of senselessness" and to stress the cruel randomness of misfortune which tirelessly accompanies our lives and fates. Coupland does not investigate the conditions that led to the killings, nor is he interested in the minds of the murderers. It is the victims who deserve his attention. In a recent interview he explains: "Some people say, how come you never explored the motives of the ones who did the shooting. To my mind, that was all people talked about. Killers get too much press already."[6]

The book was preceded by Coupland's art installation called "Tropical Birds" which referred to the sounds of unanswered mobile calls from terrified parents, the ringing tones emerging from abandoned schoolbags, as they were heard by police officers coming to inspect the crime scene. The spiritual and moral undertone of the novel was further supported by an animated internet presentation which followed the publication of the book in July 2003. The audiovisual presentation features a kneeling sillhouette and a slogan "God is nowhere" that is gradually transformed into hopeful and purifying "God is now here".[1]

2.3. Critical Reception

Immediately after the publication of his first novel, Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture (1991), Douglas Coupland was labelled by critics as the ultimate spokesman of those who were born in 1970's and 1980's. Along with the praise for his powerfully detailed observations of modern life, reviewers admire his unique descriptive style which is frequently enriched with references to disposable consumer items, recyclable television shows, distorted values and other aspects of popular culture. Although Coupland has repeatedly protested against the label of "voice of the generation X,"[4] he examines contemporary world of the young (and often the disillusioned) with "immense influence and skillful ability to express the concerns of his time."[5] G. P. Lainsbury, for instance, wrote in his review essay that Coupland's first book "succeeds in encountering the largeness and complexity of the postmodern world."[5]

Several commentators agree that Generation X is very efficient in capturing the essence of North American middle-class life and routines. It speaks openly about the common people with "relatively comfortable, suburban, middle-class existences that most book-reading Americans live" (Faye, 504), no matter how much they might try to deny it. The novel is hailed as important because it managed to arouse interest among the twenty- and thirtysomethings who are coming of age in this "accelerated

culture," where, as Coupland puts it, members of Gen X are mainly addicted to "newspapers, magazines, and TV broadcasts," and yet "nothing of any real consequence ever seems to happen" *(9)*.

In comparison with the impact of Generation X not only on the Gen-Xers both in America and Europe, its successor called Shampoo Planet (1992) earned slightly less enthusiastic reviews. Some critics mentioned Coupland's weakness in delineation of his characters who sometimes resemble mere caricatures instead of proper heroes. Julian Evans is disappointed that the author "invented characters but has no real interest in them". Despite Coupland's rich, humorous and accurate descriptions of "the Global Teens" and their everyday existential troubles, Evans complains about "the emotional vacuum of the book". However, Shampoo Planet was generally praised as highly entertaining and convincing, with an optimism that the debut novel missed. Coupland was called "a major literary and sociological event", "the Jack Kerouac of his generation", and according to Victor Dwyer, Shampoo Planet "shows a maturing author artfully evoking the hopes and dreams of a generation that has good reason to have little of either".[5]

Life After God (1994) was seen as evidence of Coupland's tendency to explore the spiritual world as a logical counterpart to the allegedly real world of prevailing material values. USA Today's Mike Snider predicted that the short story collection "may finally help him shed the burden of generation X spokesperson," as he turned his back on irony, "one of his most powerful writing tools,"[5] and changed his direction towards the serious. "You see yourself in his writing,"[4] wrote Wired editor john Battelle. Others mentioned Coupland's eye for a detail, which by then was recognized as the author's trademark, or highlighted "a touching affection for his wayward characters". Ross Thompson summarized that "for a contemporary writer he has an ability to explain our postmodern predicament in words more accessible than those of the more learned theologians I have read."[5]

Microserfs (1995) is a witty insight into an exclusive subculture of computer "geeks," also known as highly sophisticated programmers who are buried in their own "cyber-reality" among various high-tech devices and futuristic microproducts. "Coupland is the first novelist to reflect seriously on the social impact of such an environment in fiction. It needed to be done," wrote the Guardian's Robin Hunt. Others appreciated that the author once again perfectly mapped the speech and habits of a specific social group, while not losing the distance. Thus even those who never befriended a computer or "wrote a code" can still understand most of the the jokes and follow the plot. Although Coupland was again criticized for characters who are not clearly individualized and as the story develops they become almost interchangeable, most reviewers sensed in the novel "an engaging earnestness not present in other writers with similar approaches and thematic concerns."[5]

Girlfriend in a Coma (1998), Coupland's attempt to explore such crucial and serious subjects as the meaning of life and the end of the world, left many a critic unconvinced. "Coupland excels at inventing clever pop cultural slogans," assumed Laura Miller, "but the `higher purpose` his characters hanker after in Girlfriend in a Coma seems vague by contrast."[3] The writer was also criticized for his lack of solutions and his "seeming endorsement of the consumerism"[5] (Nadia Halim). On the contrary, in his extensive essay Canada in a Coma, Jefferson Faye argues that the book is Coupland's "another attempt to make sense of the surrounding world, and a means by which the main characters try to find a spiritual center and clear direction in a time of social ills and enviromental catastrophes" (Faye, 509). The same author defines the novel as "a call to arms" and in Karen he sees "millenial Rip Van Winkle" (Faye, 510) who is most capable of evaluating the massive changes in the world, after almost two decades of sleep.

For Douglas Coupland as a writer, the millenium started with All Families are Psychotic (2001), a novel with firm structure and occasional chronological flashbacks, evenly distributing humour, violence, love and philosophy among the members of the Drummond family. Gabriella Boston from the Washington Post welcomes the book as "a suspenseful tale that questions such fundamental issues as marriage, the modern economic system and the alienation between generations, and it never fails to amaze and entertain the reader."[5] Although at times it is "hard to feel deeply for characters who don't feel deply, and the Drummonds often experience strong emotions as profoundly as a sneeze," Jennifer Reese of the New York Times admits that there is a purpose to such behaviour: "They are typical. This grotesque family is an exaggerated version of every family."[5] Reviewers were mainly pleased with good characterization and plot (which "had long been held to be Coupland's weak points"), witty and eloquent dialogues, and the rich narrative.

The Observer review of Coupland's latest work, Hey, Noastradamus!, declares that the author "is good at labels. He is an accomplished lifestyle taxonomist, an acute observer of social trends. His books and conversation glistens with consumer brands and pop-culture name-checks. But he is not good at being labelled."[4] Other critics agree that the novel is his most serious and mature achievement so far. The former "labelled" spokesperson for the Generation X now turns his attention towards religion, loss and forgiveness, and mixes "the optimistic with the apocalyptic" in the stories about sorrow and its acceptance. The Guardian's Alfred Hickling evaluates the "masterful concluding section", where Reg (innitially accusing his own son of being a murderer for killing one of the gunmen, although it probably saved hundreds of lives) is presented as a "pitiful portrait of a wretched, broken figure who has come to realize that he terrorized others as a means of extinguishing the terror within himself." Coupland seems "to have reached a new plane of philosophical awareness," Hickling concludes.[5]

2.4. Main characters of Generation X

Andy

Andy, or Andrew Palmer, is the narrator of the novel. He comes from Portland, Oregon, from a family of seven children. Having three brothers and three sisters, he feels like "the total middle child" (or "the number five" *(155)*) who always had to work harder than most siblings to elicit any attention in the household. Andy is almost thirty years old and studies languages (Japanese is his specialty). He spent some time in Tokyo, Japan, where he worked as a foreign photo researcher in a publishing company but left both the job and the country after Mr. Takamichi, his boss, once showed him his "most valuable object" which appeared to be a disappointing low-quality photo of Marylin Monroe. He realized that he needed "less" in life, including less past, so he came to Palm Springs, California, the "quiet sanctuary from the bulk of middle-class life" *(12)*, where he now lives in a rented bungalow with his two dogs and two friends, Dag and Claire.

Andy works in Larry's Bar as a bartender, which is his idea of a McJob. He has never been in love and considers that a problem. He is emotionally cautious which relates to his childhood experience – he has "no memory of having been hugged by a parental unit" *(155)*, and therefore he is most suspicious of the practice. Even his way of dressing shows his introvert nature, as he admits on the page 18: "I dress to be obscure, to be hidden – to be generic. Camouflaged." He relies completely on his two (and maybe the only two) friends, since for him they are the most crucial pillars of support, safety, and security. Andy values friendship as a quality which is directly opposed to a life surrounded by things and objects. Repeatedly, he longs for "less things in life" and admits that he does not even want anything for Christmas.

Andy is a sensitive observer and a thoughtful antipole of energetic and sometimes impulsively behaving Dag. His stories and observations feature a great deal of experiences from Douglas Coupland's real life, his character is thus very autobiographical at times. Andy's younger brother Tyler, the representative of "the Global Teens" who also plays an important part throughout the book, is the main character of the Generation X follow-up novel called Shampoo Planet (published in 1992).

Dag

Dagmar Bellinghausen comes from Toronto, Canada. He lives in a bungalow between Andy's and Claire's, works at the same McJob as Andy, and occasionally gets into a habit of vandalizing things of relatively arguable value, mostly luxury cars. He has incredible capability of talking to strangers and winning instantly their sympathy and respect. He also possesses a talent for making immediate, unpredictable decisions, and is very skillful at defining the world and people around him. If Andy prefers silent thinking, Dag's preference is to put his precise observations into words as often as possible. His favourite phrase is "hey, a lot like life, isn't it?" *(71)*

Dag used to work in marketing business, labouring "from eight till five in front of sperm-dissolving VDT performing abstract tasks that indirectly enslave the Third World" *(22)*. Having left the job after a relieving argument with his boss, concerning the unbearable workplace conditions, Dag turned into a Basement Person, which means that he decided to free himself from the "system." To heal the taint that marketing gave him, he stopped cutting his hair, developed new friends, forgot about belongings, accesories, minimalist art decorations, semidisposable Swedish furniture, and other objects distracting him from "being earnest", and went to Buffalo, New York to live with his brother Matthew by Lake Erie. However, his "life-style escape" did not seem to work, and soon Dag experienced his Mid-twenties Breakdown: he was haunted by depression, could not bear watching TV (because he would not be able to achieve the

happiness of the people on it, anyway) and “started to find humanity repulsive.” It was high time for a change, so he chose to move “to where the weather is hot and dry and where cigarettes are cheap,” and the proper choice of location was Palm Springs, California.

Dag is both scared and fascinated with nuclear explosions, often mentioning the posibility of nuclear catastrophes in his stories. Moreover, according to Andy, Dag seems to be afraid of the future, the same way that Andy’s parents are, and lingers too much in the present. On the other hand, Dag has the clearest idea of the three friends about what he wants to do in the future (he would like to own a small hotel in San Felipe), and in the end he leaves for Mexico to realize this dream.

Claire

Claire Baxter works in a perfume store. She arrived in Palm Springs on the hot windy Mother’s Day weekend that Nostradamus had supposedly predicted would be the end of the world. The members of her large family called her Spinster. She clearly did not share their idea of fun, did not like the concept of “the end of the world party” by the swimming pool, and did not participate in the endless talk that “so strongly captured the spirit of our times” *(39)* – the empty utterances about famous record producers, the look of a plastic lipofat at nurse’s office, male models, Eurodisco, questions whether we can damage the sun if we wanted to, and computer viruses.

She is the least defined person out of the three friends. Details about her past are not known, and every time when Andy tries to characterize her, it is only small pieces of information which are disclosed to the readers. She likes retro looks, she dresses accordingly, and if she has children, she is going to give them utterly retro names, like Verna or Ralph. She likes to keep her room perfectly clean and tidy, and “she will go to incredible lenghts to get the desired effect” *(84)*. Once, she complains that she has problems making the same sex friends. Throughout the novel she struggles

to handle an unfortunate love affair with handsome but shallow Tobias, and after they part she joins Dag in his Mexican hotel plan.

Claire has never fallen in love with Dag or Andy, which is the essential reason for their strong and functioning friendship. “Just being friends does simplify life,” agrees Andy on the page 67. She understands Andy’s feelings of alienation from the family and shares Dag’s ominous visions of nuclear threat (“I never feel like I’m putting food in one of these things,” she muses while heating dinner in the microwave. “It feels more like I’m inserting fuel rods into a core.” *(138)*) They all understand one another, trade their bedtime stories as well as everyday troubles, and together they fight the outside world which has become too hostile and too unfair to be endured alone.

Tobias

To characterize Claire’s highly interesting boyfriend, whom she calls a “gripping stranger,” is best left to Andy:

> He has one of those bankish money jobs of the sort that when, at parties, he tells you what he does, you start to forget as soon as he tells you. He affexcts a tediuos corporate killspeak. He’s a control freak and considers himself informed. He likes to make jokes about paving Alaska and nuking Iran. But then Tobias has circus-freak-show good looks, so Dag and I are envious. Tobias could stand on a downtown corner at midnight and cause a traffic gridlock. It’s too depressing for normal looking Joes. “He’ll never have to work a day in his life if he doesn’t want to,” says Dag. “Life is not fair.” Something about Tobias always estracts the phrase “life’s not fair” from people. *(89)*

Andrew continues:

> He embodies to me all of the people of my own generation who used all that was good in themselves just to make money; who use their votes for short-term gain. Who ended up blissful in the bottom-feedinig jobs – marketing, land flipping, ambulance chasing, and money brokering. (...) Oh, I don't hate Tobias. I realize that I see in him something that I might have become, something that all of us can become in the absence of vigilance. *(91)*

Tobias is not present in the novel to be used exclusively as an exemplary counterpart who is balancing the overall cleverness and awareness of the main heroes with his ill lifestyle and vile character. He does represent the world out of which Andy, Dag and Claire escaped but from time to time he is given a chance to re-evaluate his behaviour and life philosophy. However, every time he is offered such a chance, he wastes it, or leaves it unnoticed.

Elvissa

Elvissa is Claire's good friend whose real name is Catherine. She was nicknamed by Andy because her hairstyle together with the shape of her "large, anatomically disproportionate" head reminded him of the rock and roll singer Elvis Presley. Still, everybody likes her and she is a good story-teller, too. Her origins are unknown, she simply left her old life behind her and now she is determined to create a completely new life for herself. There is a certain atmosphere of secret around Elvissa. She would not reveal what she does or has done for a living but later she allegedly accepts a gardening job at Santa Barbara and leaves Palm Springs secretly, which saddens Claire who is thus losing the only "decent friend" of the same sex.

2.5. Plot Summary of Generation X

Concerning the structure, the novel is divided into 31 entitled chapters which are gathered into three parts. Every chapter contains several footnotes that are frequently distributed at the bottom of the pages in the form of slogans, dictionary entries, definitions or simple pictures. These footnotes illustrate the plot, explain or underline particular situations, and describe the vocabulary and lifestyle of the Generation X (see appendix). They are coined by Douglas Coupland and they refer to the original intention of the publisher who initially asked Coupland to write a nonfiction guide book to the yet unnamed generation of people in their twenties. Even the chapter titles themselves appear to be either statements of "Gen-Xers" or small pieces of advice for them.

Part One

(Consists of 11 chapters: The sun is your enemy; Our parents had more; Quit recycling the past; I am not a target market; Quit your job; Dead at 30 buried at 70; It can't last; Shopping is not creating; Re con struct; Enter hyperspace; December 31, 1999)

At the beginning Andy shortly remembers his trip to Canada to witness the total eclipse of the sun when he was fifteen. One and a half decades later we meet his two friends and neighbours – Dag, who comes back from work at Larry's Bar, and Claire who returns from a "date from hell". The setting is a retirement resort in Palm Springs, California, and the time is a few weeks prior to Christmas of 1999. The three friends take a ride to an afternoon picnic in a deserted place in the mountains, during which Andy introduces Dag to readers and then Dag himself recollects his past with a story from his working days in an advertising/marketing company. He also describes his Mid-twenties crisis which led to his eventual retreat to Palm Springs.

After Dag's life story, Andy recalls the first meeting with Claire and depicts the events of the day when she (and her large family) arrived in Palm Springs. It is then Claire's turn to begin with her story of the day, and it is a Texlahoma story. Texlahoma is a mythic world which the three friends created to set most of their stories in. According to them, it is an asteroid orbiting the earth, where the year is permanently 1974 (the year of the highest economic growth in the United States, the year "from which real wages never grew ever again" *(46)*). When the fantasy story is over, Andy reveals some facts about himself to readers and then shares a real Tokyo experience with his friends. The story about relative meaning of the word "value" clarifies his presence in Palm Springs – he needed to take refuge from the world of false priorities and material-only possessions. "To look at a rock or a cactus and know that I am the first person to see that cactus and that rock" *(66)*.

Dag contributes to the picnic with a story which highlights his favourite topic, the end of the world. This time it takes place in a supermarket at the moment of a nuclear explosion and features a detailed description of the last seconds of the people standing in the checkout line. The appropriate footnote at the bottom of the page explains that Dag's is a "Mental Ground Zero" story because the location where one visualizes oneself during the dropping of the atomic bomb is frequently a shopping mall *(70)*.

Part Two

(Consists of 12 chapters: New Zealand gets nuked, too; Monsters exist; Don't eat yourself; Eat your parents; Purchased experiences don't count; Remember Earth clearly; Change color; Why am I poor?; Celebrities die; I am not jealous; Leave your body; Grow flowers)

The second part begins with Dag's disappearance the day after the picnic. His friends are not too worried, since from time to time he suddenly embarks at such "brief creative bursts that allow him to endure the tedium

of real work" *(75)*. He calls from the Mojave Desert in Nevada where he went to explore the remains of atomic test sites. After coming back he accidentally shatters a jar with green crystals of Trinitite – the sand from the nuclear site which melted into a new, possibly radioactive substance during the tests, now being sold as a souvenir – all over Claire's place. Since then, the terrified Claire stays at Andy's bungalow.

Andy and Dag try to clean the appartment, while Claire is visited by her yuppie boyfriend Tobias and her good friend Elvissa, who asks everybody about their best memory of Earth. "What one moment for you defines what it's like to be alive on this planet?" *(104)* For Claire it is the first experience of snow, Dag chooses the smell of gasoline which he spilt unwillingly as a child (because "it is so clean. It smells like the future." *(107)*), and Andy settles for the smell of bacon on a Sunday morning at home when all nine family members gathered in the kitchen for breakfast, the only such morning "where we would all be normal and kind to each other" *(108)*.

Andy's brother Tyler calls to remind Andy about upcoming Christmas and to book a spare bungalow for January, when he and his teenage friends come to Palm Springs to celebrate Elvis Presley's birthday. Later that day, on the way home from work at Larry's Bar, Dag vandalizes yet another luxury car (the first night of the book it was a Cutlass Supreme, now it is a racing Aston Martin) by burning holes in its convertible roof with a cigarette, thus eventually setting the car on fire. Before the riot act, Dag mentions to Andy his plans for the future – he wants to own a small hotel in Mexico, where, among other things, people who would tell good stories could stay for free.

Claire's bedtime story of the day is about a girl called Linda who decided to meditate for seven years to reach the state of saintliness (or spiritual ecstasy) but somehow confused the instructions and meditated for much too long, finally dying of exhaustion but happy. The part two of the novel ends with Andy, waking up briefly in the middle of the night, in the room

where the three friends and two dogs fell asleep after the story time. “These are the creatures I love and who love me. I feel so happy I could die. If I could have it thus, I would like this moment to continue forever” *(150)*.

Part Three

(Consists of eight chapters: Define normal; MTV not bullets; Trans form; Welcome home from Vietnam, son; Adventure without risk is Disneyland; Plastics never disintegrate; Await lightning; Jan.01, 2000)

Prior to his departure for Christmas in Oregon, Andy remembers an old family photograph, and listing subsequent fates of his brothers and sisters, so young and “perfect“ in the picture, he feels that the atmosphere, and indeed the innocence of the time, is lost. Claire spends the Christmas Eve in New York with Tobias, Dag remains alone in Palm Springs. Andy tries to recreate the precious atmosphere of past family Christmases by lighting an enormous quantity of candles on the Christmas Day morning but the lights enlighten the dead spirit of magic for a short while only (“our emotions, while wonderful, are transpiring in a vacuum” *(171)*). It is “time to escape” *(172)*.

After Andy comes back home to Palm Springs, Claire calls to inform him at length how and why she finally parted with Tobias. She also asks for some flowers to be put in her bungalow, as she would like to live there again (now that the place is “decontaminated”). The night before she arrives from New York, Dag and Andy work as bartenders at a party which is held by a local celebrity Bunny Hollander. When two police officers enter the party and inquire about Dag, it is clear that the burned car was Hollander’s. Dag leaves the house by the back door but does not plan to escape. Instead, he hides in the garden for a while and asks Andy for a story (“a short story – anything will do - and then I’ll go up.” *(194)*). Just like the character in his bedtime story about nuclear explosion in the

supermarket, before Dag returns to the party, he kisses Andy, saying, "there. I always wanted to do that" *(196)*.

It is New Year's Day. Andy discovers messages from both Claire and Dag, who are already on their way to San Felipe, Mexico to realize Dag's plans and become hoteliers. They urge Andy to join them as soon as possible, for it is time to start a new life, a new existence. The last chapter describes Andy's ride to Mexico, during which he is once again impressed by the wonders of nature (akin to his experience of the eclipse of the sun from the first page). Initially, he observes a big black cloud on the horizon. At first he panicks that it may be a thermonuclear cloud but when he discovers that it is caused by local farmers who are burning the stubble of their fields, he just stops his car to marvel at the unusual sight with "profound relief". Another transcendent moment comes when Andy, surrounded by a group of mentally retarded children who also stopped to witness the event, spots a white egret, circling majestically over the field. The bird grazes his head, cutting his scalp slightly but Andy feels entranced and "chosen". He is comforted by the children, suddenly "dog-piled by an instant family, in their adoring, healing, uncritical embrace, each member wanting to show their affection more than the other." While the white bird lands in the black field to feed, Andy yields to the powerful emotion, recognizing that "this crush of love is unlike anything I have ever known" *(207)*.

Appendix: Numbers

The brief last section of the book is called Numbers. It is a statistical appendix which features results of recent public opinion polls, various population reports as well as economic and scientific scores, quoted by the author to further describe the state of North American society at the end of the century (for example, comparison of hours spent watching TV per week by average children, percentage increase of income for senior citizens between 1967 and 1987, or percentage of the United States budget spent on the elderly and on education in 1990).

2.6. Main themes of Generation X

2.6.1. Search for a meaning

> "Do you really think we enjoy hearing about your brand-new million-dollar home when we can barely afford to eat Kraft Dinner sandwiches in our grimy little shoe boxes and we're pushing thirty? A home you won in a genetic lottery, I might add, sheerly by dint of your having been born at the right time in history? You'd last about ten minutes if you were my age these days, Martin. and I have to endure pinheads like you rusting above me for the rest of my life, always grabbing the best piece of cake first and then putting a barbed-wire fence around the rest. you really make me sick." *(26)*

The speech of complaint, which is delivered by one of the main characters of the novel Generation X on his last day at work in a marketing company, and which is directed with utmost honesty towards his superior Martin, describes feelings of the young man who is concerned with his workplace conditions and expressing his attitude to the unfair social situation in a particular corporation. At the same time, however, it represents opinions of a large group of young North American people in their twenties and early thirties who consider their lives and culture as somewhat dysfunctional and devoid of meaning.

Acording to Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia, Generation X used to be called "the 13th generation" until Douglas Coupland's novel popularized the term. The number 13 means the thirteenth generation who saw the American flag (the first one being the contemporaries of Benjamin Franklin).[7] The number also evokes a notorious symbol of bad luck, and indeed, this generation does not seem to be born into the luckiest times. Coupland only exchanged the number for the letter X, which is more appropriate to describe the age group. "X" resembles "a great unknown," or, as the author himself puts it, "a label for the generation that wants to remain unlabelled." It consists of people who were born in the 1970's and 1980's, and who now, at the turn of the century, express the frustrations of living in the shadow of its elders, the so-called Baby Boomers.

The Boom generation comprises of Americans born after World War II and is generally characterised by a significant rise in the birth rate and a steady line of flourishing economy, stretching from the 1950's as far as the 1980's. The Boomers experienced the hippie idealism of the late 1960's as well as the era of growing material comfort in the next decade.[7] Their descendents are well aware of the fact that they will hardly ever equal or surpass their parents' standard of living, facing instead the bitter disappointment of diminishing economy, new diseases, powerful and merciless mass media, and a world which is overpopulated and overloaded with too much information.

In his debut novel, Coupland portrays a social and cultural group of "twentysomethings" who are overeducated but underemployed, who work their unsatisfactory McJobs, watch enormous amounts of TV, collect unemployment benefits, and often trade their life energy for apathy, alienation, and extensive shopping therapy. The members of Generation X already understand the way society functions and the values that it worships, and they tend to mask their sense of lost direction and hopelessness with frequent cynicism and irony. "My life had become a series of scary incidents that simply weren't stringing together to make an interesting story" *(36)*, remembers Dag the worst period of his life, his "Mid-twenties crisis, " when he could no longer see a point in his job, in his existence, in the world around him. Coupland does not offer saving solutions to the dissilusioned Gen-Xers, only aims to document the lifestyle options open to them, from the basement suite subculture (which involves dropping completely "out of the system," breaking all the bonds with society and possibly disposing of all material possessions that prevent one from "being earnest") to healthy minimalism and the desire to keep searching for meaning, regardless of the results.

In Generation X, the three main characters regularly engage in a certain story-telling routine. Most of the stories feature alienated individuals who are desperately seeking for either a social or spiritual system. In a world that "has gotten too big – way beyond our capacity to tell stories about it" *(6)*, Andy, Claire and Dag still feel the necessity to justify their existence by exchanging narratives that might give the millenial world some meaning. In the first chapter of the book, they all agree that "either our lives become stories, or there's just no way to get through them" *(10)*. It is thus clear from the very beginnig that they do not decide to trade the painful reality for the comfort of some soothing fairy-tales. On the contrary, they are determined to "tell stories and to make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process" *(10)*. It becomes their private strategy in the quest for the sense in semingly senseless times.

2.6.2. Popular culture

> Number of murders the average child has seen on television by the age of sixteen: 18.000
> Number of commercials American children see by age eighteen: 350.000
> Number of TV sets in 1991: 750 million
> Chances that an American has been on TV: 1 in 4
> Percentage of Americans who say they do not watch TV: 8
> Number of hours per week spent watching TV by those who say they do not watch TV: 10
> *(210)*

Popular culture of the 1990's, when Douglas Coupland embarked upon writing his first novel, was marked by an apparent victory of consumerism over traditional culture with its historically confirmed and legitimate values. Without a doubt, the trend continues to evolve in the same direction in the 21st century as well. Families no longer function as a basic unit of society which is supposed to provide its members with care, support, and strength to deal with life's difficulties. Marriages often fail to last for more than a first real argument, especially when a solution is so common and trivial these days ("Don't worry, mother... If the marriage doesn't work out, we can always get divorced" *(178)*). Technologies and

sophisticated products which are meant to make our lives easier, like the internet, only promote further alienation, and the most meaningful activity (apart from watching TV, of course) is seemingly shopping.

Television, as a highly accessible medium, influences and shapes the members of Generation X in a most fundamental way. It is the main source of information about the outside world as well as a means of comparison with other people. Viewers often evaluate their standard of living and the accuracy of their opinions (or emotions) by the messages coming straight to their living rooms via TV sets. Coupland illustrates this phenomenon by introducing the term "Tele-parablizing." It translates as "morals used in everyday life that derive from TV sitcom plots" *(138)*. It is almost necessary for the Gen-Xers to be able to quote their favourite TV characters, use particular scenes from a popular series to exemplify their own experiences or to name all leading actors from prime-time situational comedies.

Television is believed to reflect the spirit of the times and the viewer's feelings most clearly. When Dag suffers through his emotionally exhausting period of Mid-twenties crisis, he complains: "I seemed unable to achieve the animal happiness of people on TV, so I had to stop watching it" *(35)*. Similarly, his friend Andy, looking for the right parable which he could use to compare the climate in California, mentions logically that "there is no weather in Palm Springs – just like TV" *(10)*. Television offers the easiest way of gathering information by skilfully selecting only the crucial events and news, and serving it in a quick pace together with regular commercial spots, thus leaving the recipients a little time to digest the message. It also brings a solution in the absence of other meaningful activity ("what do you do down there, anyway? You don't have a TV" *(172)*, Tyler asks), in which sense it is a two-dimensional counterpart to another aspect of popular culture, spacious and all-inclusive shopping malls.

In Generation X the shopping malls signify mainly the world that changes inevitably into a "global village." Where a person comes from suddenly seems irrelevant, "since everyone has the same stores in their mini-malls" *(5)*. One of Coupland's coinages illustrates this situation with the concept of "Terminal Wanderlust". It describes behaviour of Gen-Xers who are "unable to feel rooted in any one environment," so they "move continually in the hopes of finding an idealized sense of community in the next location" *(199)*. However, the distinctions are often small and insignificant because every destination appears to resemble the previous one, with the same shops and very similar items on offer. It is harder still to bring presents from one's holiday, for the same souvenirs are on sale in the supermarket around the corner. For the Gen-Xers who look for their own identities (and therefore belong to the most immigrant generation born in the twentieth century), it is more and more difficult to find an unspoilt spot in the global village, with no TV and without unified, anonymous shopping malls where anonymous human beings trace the remains of their lives in lifeless buy-one-get-one-free objects.

2.6.3. The need for authenticity

> "O, my-" says Mom, as the three of them enter the room, speechless, turning in slow circles, seeing the normally dreary living room covered with a molten living cake-icing of white fire, all surfaces devoured in flame – a dazzling fleeting empire of light. All of us are instantaneously disembodied from the vulgarities ofd gravity; we enter a realm in which all bodies can perform acrobatics like an astronaut in orbit, cheered on by febrile, licking shadows. *(170)*

In the world of diminished possibilities, prevailing monetary values and doubtable chances for the birghter future, Andy and his fellow friends seek for genuinely real experiences that would (together with the bedtime stories) justify their existence in this complexed, user-unfriendly world. Such transcendent moments are usually connected with nature and natural phenomena which for the Gen-Xers represent something that shall eventually outlast all trivial and passing values of our times. A new car, a superior position in top management, or perfectly suntanned skin can

never compete with constant wonders of nature which are ready to become our "takeways" – the moments that for us define what it is like to be alive on this planet, right here and now. The examples are numerous: when Andy travels to the Canadian prairie to witness the eclipse of the sun, he feels "darkness and inevitability and fascination," and experiences the same feelings as "must have been held by most young people since the dawn of time" *(4)*. This connection with prehistoric teenagers defines his perception of the world, for since then he becomes a thoughtful and observant philosopher. Another identically authentic moment concludes the novel. Andy stops his car in the field to watch an enormous black cloud on the horizon and admires a beautiful "cocaine white" egret who is flying closely above Andy's head and slightly grazes his scalp. It is a real contact of a human being with a creature of almost unworldly elegance and wisdom. While the bird lands in the field, "occupying a position of absolute privilege," Andy is so entranced by "the moment's beauty" *(207)* that he forgets that he has been cut.

Dag often implements the sun into his fantasies and inventions. At first, he thinks of the sun as the only place that could help him in his plan to cleanse the world from all supplies of plutonium – the rocket-loads of the toxic waste would be "fired straight into the sun" *(189)*. Then he talks about his dying day, planting flowers in the desert, and again, "the angel will reach my flimsy bones and (...) I'm carried, soundlessly and with absolute affection, directly into the sun" *(195)*. However, Dag is also the one to remind readers that this is the end of the twentieth century and the nature is not just beautiful and harmless any more but contains lots of traces of merciless human activities, too. The sun is still the adored life source but nowadays it is a lethal entity as well. It can be cruel: "When I think of the sun, I think of an Australian surf bunny, eighteen years old, maybe, somewhere on bondi Beach, and discovering her first keratosis lesion on her shin. She's screaming inside her brain and already plotting how she's going to steal Valiums from her mother" *(9)*.

Claire's most precious memory of Earth is her first experience of snow, which for her occured in the middle of a traffic island in Manhattan, New York:

> "My face went bang, right into my first snowflake ever. It melted in my eye. I didn't even know what it was at first, but then I saw millions of flakes – all white and smelling of ozone, floating downward like the shed skin of angels." *(107)*

On another occasion, while visiting his home in Portland, Oregon for Christmas, Andy arranges hundreds of candles in the living room to recreate the vanished family atmosphere of togetherness with similarly magical results. His parents and brother Tyler are astonished by his idea, and so is the author of the light show: "In my head I'm reinventing this old space in its burst of chrome yellow. The effect is more than I'd considered; this light is painlessly and without rancor burning acetylene holes in my forehead and plucking me out of my body. This light is also making the eyes of my family burn, if only momentarily, with the possibilities of existence in our time" *(171)*. Such parts of the novel leave the irony of Gen-Xers aside and always contain a great offering of lyricism. They also enlighten the lives and hearts of the main characters and inject the otherwise rather despondent story with hope.

2.6.4. The future and the past of Generation X

> "You see, when you're middle class, you have to live with the fact that history will ignore you. You have to live with the fact that history can never champion your causes and that history will never feel sorry for you. It is the price that is paid for day-to-day comfort and silence. And because of this price, all happinesses are sterile; all sadnesses go unpitified" *(171)*

Although Generation X is based on private experiences of its three main characters, the issues that they deal with and the troubles that they face can be projected into the lives of thousands of American youngsters who experience similar issues and are familiar with identical problems. The middle class in the above quote thus represents the vast majority of

common people who will hardly ever achieve anything special, who will not lead outstandingly original lives, and who shall never belong to the list of posthumous entries in who-was-who encyclopaedias. Unlike the generation before them, these people are not firmly anchored in time, for they are not connected with their past, nor they are certain about their future.

The history of the generation Xers is full of references to the cold war and the ubiquitous danger of nuclear apocalypse. During their childhood the mass media as well as school institutions prepared them for the constant threat of the World War III. The American children (just like the ones from the former Eastern bloc) were growing up with the certitude that the nuclear explosion would be the cause of the end of the world and that the world would most likely end as early as within their lifetime, at that. Hence, the theme of a nuclear catastrophe as a means to an end appears frequently throughout the whole novel.

It is especially connected with Dag's character and his recurring "accounts of what it's like to be Bombed, lovingly detailed, and told in deadpan voice" *(68)*. His shopping mall story features two friends who are killed by an atomic explosion while standing in the checkout line. When he disappears one day, he goes to Nevada to inspect the former nuclear test sites. It is from there that he calls Andy and tells him a story about a man who was obssessed with postcards and photographs of nuclear "mushrooms". Moreover, it is from there that he brings Claire a present in the form of shiny green (and probably still radioactive) Trinitite beads. By request, he then co-operates to "decontaminate" Claire's room. One of his inventions later concerns a plan for decontamination of the whole planet Earth.

However, it is not only Dag who still bears the image of nuclear apocalypse and "the Flash" in his mind. Tobias, Claire's boyfriend is said to like joking about "nuking Iran" *(89)*, and Andy himself panicks for a moment towards the end of the book, when he spots an enormously big

black cloud on the horizon: “It was a vision that could only have come from one of Dag’s bedtime stories: it was a thermonuclear cloud; (...) it was not imaginary. It was the same cloud I’d been dreaming of steadily since I was five, shameless, exhausted, and gloating” *(204)*. Even the Lichtensteinian picture illustrating the first chapter of part three shows a man who is covering his eyes, with the inscription “Oh no! It’s finally happened! The blinding flash of light!” followed by relieving “Phew! It was only lightning” *(152)*.

Andy, Claire, and Dag like to set their stories in an imaginary place where there is always the year 1974. It is the year of the highest economic growth and a synonym for a happy period in the United States of America, a reminder of something that has never been achieved since. The Gen-Xers, though, do not tend to be stuck in time for ever. They try to free themselves from the past so as to be able to act in the present and in the future more effectively. Claire rarely mentions any details about her past, she has already achieved the liberation. Dag removed the last bonds with history after the Mid-twenties crisis, which he recollects only to clarify his presence in Palm Springs. Otherwise, he is fully focused on the future, as well. Andy remembers a lot (and he is the only one to go home for Christmas), and it is clear he feels sorry about the way things are – while recalling the old family photograph, for instance, he asks rather rhetorically, “Oh, how did we all end up so messy?” *(157)* Anyway, he also is on the verge of a release from his past, when he finally realizes that “it’s time to move on” *(168)*.

The future for the Generation X holds an important and difficult challenge: they must learn to live in the complexity of the world which they inherited from their parents. They must stop looking back and envying the Boomers "their upbringings that were so clean, so free of futurelessness" (Andy) *(98)*, for this is a different world altogether. They must also grasp the possibilities given to them by current inventions and technologies, and make them useful. Because, as Mr. Douglas Coupland says, "it's never going to go away. You can't de-invent a coffee cup and you can't de-invent a CD player or a TV, so you might as well get used to it and go with it."[4]

As for his characters in Generation X, the future is most definitely awaiting them in a small hotel in San Felipe, Mexico, where people who can tell good stories can always stay for free.

3.1. Biography of Chuck Palahniuk

In the first years following the publication of his successful and both critically and demographically acclaimed debut novel Generation X, Douglas Coupland was strongly opposed to the idea of taking responsibility for the post-boomer generation by becoming its unofficial spokesperson. Rather than accepting the label given to him by reviewers and critics, he expressed his own ambition concerning his appropriate place among other renowned authors: "The three other writers that I'd want to be grouped with, despite all our different backgrounds, are Chuck Palahniuk, J. G. Ballard, and Kurt Vonnegut."[4] His wish seems to have come true. The last two names have repeatedly been compared to Coupland in various reviews, while Coupland's name, contrarily, was frequently used in comparison with the first author, Palahniuk, shrotly after his debut novel appeared on the bookshop shelves in 1996.

Chuck Palahniuk was born on February 21, 1962 in Pasco, Washington to a family of Fred (working as a railroad brakeman) and Carol (who was employed as an office manager at a nuclear power plant). The origins of his unusual surname date back to the time when his grandparents immigrated to the United States from the Ukraine. Allegedly, their neighbours did not know how to call them, so they just used the first names – Paula and Nick. Hence the new name which gradually became Palahniuk but still keeps its specific pronunciation ("paul-ah-nick"). Very little is known about Chuck's childhood. It may be assumed, however, that it was not a particularly happy period. Due to frequent arguments, repeated separations and the eventual divorce of his parents, Palahniuk (together with his sister and two brothers) spent most of his early days in eastern Washington where his grandparents kept a cattle ranch.

In 1986, Palahniuk graduated from the University of Oregon's School of Journalism and accepted a position in a minor Portland newspaper but the modest wages were not sufficient enough to cover his student loans. So, he decided to work in a truck manufacturing factory, where he would stay for 13 years. At first, he worked on the assembly line and later as a research mechanic, writing technical manuals on latest vehicle improvements and various technological modifications.

Afterwards, Palahniuk changed his highly inspirational occupation to volunteering at a hospice as an escort, transporting disabled and terminally ill people to therapies and group meetings. At the same time, he attended a workshop on creative writing, run by the Portland author Tom Spanbauer who was the first to suggest the idea of a writer's career. "He sat me down and said, the quality of your work, you could be one of the people who decide what our culture is. And that just changed how I saw myself in the world,"[2] remembers Palahniuk the turning point of his life.

His very first manuscript, called Invisible Monsters and inspired by the glamorous world of fashion industry, was refused by 12 different publishers due to its dark and morbid content. Convinced about the potential quality of his book Palahniuk decided to express his anger in a novel that would "offend, shock and punish all the people who wouldn't publish my good work."[2] The result, in which the author summarised his memories of the hospice group meetings, personal experiences from angst-ridden fist fights and frustrations from contemporary American life, was called Fight Club. To his great surprise, it was accepted almost immediately and published in 1996.

Fight Club subsequently gained enormous popularity among readers as well as reviewers, and became the basis of the 1999 Hollywood film of the same name which was directed by David Fincher. A year before its premiere, Palahniuk published his second novel Survivor, followed shortly by a rewritten version of Invisible Monsters. So far, he has written

seven novels, several non-fiction essays, reviews and newspaper articles (for LA Times, Sunday Herald, or Portland Mercury, among others), and conducted interviews with prestigous celebrities for such magazines as Gear or The Black Book. His latest book is a dark and strongly black humoured Diary, published in August 2003.

3.2. Major works

Fight Club (Norton, New York 1996)

When Palahniuk sent his first manuscript to a publisher, it was rejected, presumably because of its rather shocking content. Instead of feeling discouraged, he decided to revenge on the publishers with an even more outrageous story which he wrote with the "complete freedom that I'd never be published, anyway."[2] The result was partly autobiographical, partially provocative but most of all a powerfully concieved statement called Fight Club.

It is a story of a nameless narrator who makes his living investigating car accidents all across the United States in order to assess whether the car company is liable to repay the damage or not. He si depressed, disillusioned with his life, insomnious and occasionally suicidal (during his incessant flights across the land and back, for instance, he contemplates his own death by plane crash). His main leisure activity is collecting items of furniture and brand-name limited series products that make his life "complete." Although he does not suffer from any fatal disease apart from a terminal stage of consumerism, he finds his comfort at support-group meetings for incurable patients. The anonymity of the gathering and sincerity of its attendants help him to cure the feeling of his life's emptiness for a while (and finally make him "sleep like a baby" *(22)* again). However, the real solution to his existence seems to come only after he befriends Tyler Durden, an unpredictable young man with a sympathy for anacrchy and destruction who suggests starting a fight club.

Tyler's idea was born out of Palahniuk's own fighting experiences. His bruised and bloody face usually elicited silence from his coworkers instead of questions, people would mostly avoid eye contacts and nobody returned his greetings. The lack of response made him realize that "you could really do anything you wanted in your personal life, as long as you looked so bad that people would not want to know the details."[2]

In the novel, the secret underground fight club is a chance to lose everything in order to start again, it is a way of escape from the everyday routine and the despair of boring jobs by releasing all negative emotions and poisoning aggressions in a genuine, physical and honest fight. Despite the first rule of Tyler's fight club (which is "you do not talk about fight club" *(48)*), the idea spreads quickly and inspires hundreds of other men in creating their own branches of the club. They meet regularly to experience real victories as well as a real pain, wearing their scars proudly like membership cards to some sacred community. Nevertheless, Tyler Durden plans to take the idea of fight club to the next level, which apparently is a New World Order. He unveils the Project Mayhem, begins to create a private army of the most determined fighters, and works towards his aim to paralyse the whole corporate America by attacking the world's tallest building.

The provocative story of Fight Club earned its author instant recognition as a new important writer. The frequent depictions of violence together with Palahniuk's (or Tyler's) destructive views, however, complicated the subsequent release of its film adaptation. At first, the premiere of Fight Club (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1999) had to be postponed because of the tragedy at Columbine High School, and in less than two years the film disappeared from most American cinemas completely, the falling skyscrapers reminding the audience of recent 9/11 events too vividly.

The Czech edition of Fight Club was published in the year 2000 (Klub rváčů, Volvox Globator, Praha).

Survivor (Norton, New york 1999)

Palahniuk's second novel is a less violent but still bitter and darkly comic picture of American life. It tells a story of Tender Branson, possibly the last living member of a church community called the Creedish Death Cult, who is recording his life story into the black box of a Boeing 747. The jet plane is otherwise empty, comandeered by an autopilot, and heading towards the heart of Australia. Its engines cease to function one by one, so Branson knows that he has a limited time to finish his story. To simulate the final countdown, the chapters of the novel proceed in reverse chronological order, beginning with 47, and the pages begin with number 289 and end with number one. The book uses the same method as Fight Club, where the main character is introduced to readers in what is nearly the final scene of the plot and only then, in time flashbacks, he unwinds his past. Moreover, as the story develops, Branson repeatedly checks the cockpit microphone to make sure that the message is still being recorded, thus reminding the readers that the end is approaching and that it is, indeed, inevitable.

And with the time running out, Branson has a lot to tell, too. Raised in the suicidal religious community in rural Nebraska, he is sent to the outside world on the day of his adulthood to devote his life to service. He then works as a butler for a wealthy couple, sending all his earnings to the cult. Thanks to a mistake in a local newspaper, his telephone number appears in an advertisment for a suicide help line, so at night, Branson counsels desperate people who are about to terminate their lives (and rely solely on the help line as the last chance). Needless to say, he advises the callers to proceed. After an FBI raid on the Creedish colony resulting in a mass suicide, he discovers that he might be among last remaining members of the cult and because upon hearing the news about the end of the colony all Creedalists must immediately kill themselves, by not following the rule he really becomes the only survivor of the cult.

Branson hires an agent to help him handle the sudden fame, and despite his humble religious origins he decides to make the most of it. He quickly becomes a media star, a real celebrity with his own TV show, a team of assistents, stadium mega-events, chemically enhanced musculature and heroically enhanced autobiography in hardcover. “How the agent explained his plan to me was, we weren’t targeting the smartest people in the world, just the most” *(105)*. Half of Branson’s success is achieved with the prophecies that he regularly receives secretly from his friend Fertility Hollis, who is a psychic, and then airs them on TV or during the pseudo-religious services. When he realizes that it is high time for him to escape the media madness, he disappears during the riot at the Super Bowl, after he cleverly reveals final results of the game at halftime. Eventually, he manages to hijack the Boeing 747, in which he is now recording his life story into the indestructible black box.

In Survivor, Palahniuk attacked the excessivness of contemporary popular culture and its uncritical adoration of the mass media. It is satirical at times and it is very rich with irony but it remains just as ironical as the society which it depicts. The novel was translated into Czech in 2002 as Program pro přeživší and published by Odeon, Prague.

Invisible Monsters (Norton, New York 1999)

The original manuscript for Palahniuk’s third novel was the story that 12 publishers rejected prior to Fight Club. The author himself says that he is glad to have had the chance to improve the novel, and that about 85 percent of the book was finally rewritten. Concieved as a satire upon the superficiality of fashion industry, the story is influenced by fashion magazines which Palahniuk reads while waiting in the laundromat.

The main heroine of the novel is a former model Shannon McFarland who lost the lower half of the face in a mysterious shooting incident. Hideously disfigured and unable to speak, she is no longer elligible for the front cover career and she is angry with her ex-boyfriend Manus and

her friend Evie, who quickly becomes Manus's new girlfriend (and does not even wait for a permission to wear half of Shannon's precious clothes colection). Together with a new friend, the transgendered Brandy Alexander, Shannon embarks on a road trip, whose main aim is to kidnap Manus, the main suspect responsible for arranging the shooting. With this achieved, they head for Texas where Evie awaits Manus impatiently, for they are to be married there.

During the journey, Shannon learns that Brandy is in fact her brother Shane, whom she had believed was dead of AIDS. He was forced to leave home after his parents discovered that he was gay and HIV positive. Ironically, shortly after his departure the McFarlands have become fanatic gay rights activists, joining the Gay Pride demonstrations, displaying a rainbow flag in the garden, and constantly grieving the death of their beloved son. Before the morbid and tragic conclusion which, again, happens in the very first chapter of the novel, Manus is punished for his cruel intentions by regular doses of female hormone pills, thus paying for Shannon's disfiguration with the same currency. The unwanted breasts seem to be only the overture of the planned revenge.

Invisible Monsters is a story obssessed with appearance and with various ways of its alteration. Shane (and now Manus, as well) demonstrates that plastic surgery and the right type of pills can enable people to change their appearances like t-shirts. It purposely exaggerates the importance of "looking great" to satirize industry which is based on bodily perfection and merciless superbeauty. It also is a novel full of relentless flashbacks, signified by lines beginning with "jump back to...". It possesses the style and the pace of shiny fashion magazines. However, the readers have been warned in advance:

> 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. *(20)*

Choke (Doubleday, New York 2001)

The new millenium was greeted by Palahniuk with his fourth novel which tackles the topic of medical support groups, initially introduced in Fight Club, from a different perspective. The central character, Victor Mancini, is a sex addict who supplements his paycheck in an unusual way: he pretends to choke while eating in expensive restaurants (sometimes even three or four times per night), so that people can save his life. Upon hearing his sad story about his unfortunate life and nightmarish childhood, such volunteers then feel sorry for him and apart from helping him to recover from the near death experience during dinner, they often continue to support him financially on a regular basis. Victor attends sessions for sex addicts but the therapy does not seem to work. Having been expelled from a medical scool, he works in a historical village dressed in ancient clothes. Additionally, his mother resides in a nursing home for mentally challenged and strongly believes that Victor was conceived by her contact with a holy relic, which would make him the direct son of Jesus.

So much for the plot which tends to be too complicated towards the end but still remains decently sarcastic and delightfully funny. The background of the book, however, is not humorous whatsoever. Palahniuk visited a number of sex addiction therapy sessions in research for the novel. “That first support group, I went because I wanted to understand my father. I wanted to know what he dealt with and why his life was girlfriend after girlfriend, wife after wife.”[5]

Fred Palahniuk’s life was indeed filled with troubles concerning both short and long term relationships. Eventually, in the summer of 1999 he responded to a personal advertisement and met a woman with whom he believed he might finally be happy. Not long afterwards, Chuck received the news that his father’s body was found next to a body of a woman in a burnt garage in the mountains outside Kendrick, Idaho. According to the court’s verdict, the woman’s ex-husband waited for them in the driveway,

shot them dead and then set fire to their bodies. At the time, they had known each other for less than two months.[2]

The tragic event, and the compulsive behaviour which preceded it, became one of the main ideas behind the novel. Together with compulsive behaviour in general, stories of people at the support meetings and private addictions dwelling inside all human beings. "Everybody in my family does something compulsively. My brother exercises. My mother gardens, I write."[5] At the same time, Palahniuk was introduced to a woman whose name was Marla, like Marla Singer in Fight Club. When he found out that she is a therapist who works with sexual addicts, "the ideas and themes of Choke were coming together, piece by piece."[5]

Choke is about a possibility of choice, too. It is about the moment "when your addictions no longer hide the truth from you. When your whole life breaks down. That's the moment when you have to somehow choose what your life is going to be about. Doping yourself with sex or drugs or food, or choosing something like writing, body building, gardening. True, this is trading one compulsive behaviour for another, but at least with the new one, you're choosing it."[5]

The Czech translation of Choke is called Zalknutí and was published by Odeon, Prague in July 2003.

Lullaby (Doubleday, New York 2002)

Palahniuk's recent project is a horror fiction trilogy that begins with the 2002 publication of Lullaby. Its main hero and narrator, Carl Streator, is a newspaper reporter whose task is to write a series of articles about Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. During the research he discovers a mysterious connection between the infant death cases and a book of poetry. Particularly, it is a children's anthology called "Poems and Rhymes from Around the World" which features an ancient Zulu culling song, originally read aloud to decrease the population of African tribes in times of famine.

The song has been carelessly reprinted (it can be found on the page 27 of the anthology), and when it is read aloud it causes the listener to die. Without any notion, parents keep reading it to their children.

Streator realizes that he apparently killed his own son and wife by the same means many years ago. The mission is now to attempt to find as many copies of the book as possible and dispose of them before it is too late. Together with his secretary Helen and her boyfriend Oyster, they drive around the country and seek for the existing copies as well as for the original book of magic spells from which the culling song was extracted. For it is believed that the original book offers enormous powers to its owner. Or, in this particular case, owners.

The theme in Lullaby (whose working title used to be Lullabye) is reminiscent of David Foster Wallace's novel Infinite Jest, where a group of students searches for a copy of a film which is rumoured to be so entertaining that its audience dies laughing. Clearly, Palahniuk aims as the same target as Wallace. His dark satire is implicitly directed at a contemporary society flooded with dangerously powerful media and often mentions the topic of TV culture where it is too difficult to recognize whether the shooting and shouting behind the wall is real or comes from a TV set. Streator also contemplates about the world infected with the killer poem: "The culling song would be a plague unique to the Information Age. Imagine a world where people shun the television, the radio, movies, the Internet, magazines and newspapers. People have to wear earplugs the way they wear condoms and rubber gloves... Imagine a new Dark Age... Imagine the books burning."[2]

Chuck Palahniuk is currently working on the last sequel to Lullaby (the second part of the trilogy being Diary, published in 2003), and his further writing plans include a short story collection which is scheduled for the year 2005.

3.3. Critical reception

Critics heralded Chuck Palahniuk's debut novel Fight Club (1996) as both disturbing and fascinating. They mostly admitted that while majority of readers was very likely to find something in the main characters' behaviour to identify with, at the same time they would probably find some issues offensive. The Publishers Weekly review called the book "caustic, outrageous, bleakly funny, violent and always unsettling" as well as "utterly original."[3] Booklist's Thomas Gaughan evaluated the novel as "gen X's most articulate assault yet on baby-boomer sensibilities" and a piece of literature which was surely destined to disturb young readers' parents. He concluded that Fight Club was "powerful, and possibly brilliant first novel."[5]

In his Guardian Unlimited article called "Bruise Control," Stuart Jeffries considered the literary and social relevance of Fight Club by calling it "the 90s reply to American Psycho, Bret Easton Ellis's satire on youthful white collar greed and banality in Wall Street in the 80s." He compared Ellis's main hero Patrik Bateman to the nameless narrator ("Palahniuk does not even bother to give him a name") in Fight Club. According to Jeffries, they both searched for their own identity, and both were limited mostly by the things they owned. The same reviewer also remarked that the book "has proven appealing to men of a certain age. At times it seems to be exclusively about men whose fathers were absent during their childhood," which complied with one of Palahniuk's original ideas for the novel's plot.[5]

Jeffries's colleague, Nick Paton Walsh from the Guardian, was not that enthusiastic, and expressed his ambivalent impressions with stressing that "Fight Club leaves the reader confused, bored and wholly frustrated that its creator could not find the words to say the halfway remarkable things caught in his mind." He admitted that the book triumphed in mimicking contemporary pre-millenial society. However, it "denies the fact that art

should transcend the torpor and inarticulacy of the society it documents, not mimic it." Instead of reading such books, Walsh suggested to look out of the window to see the real life.[2] Still, many critics recognized Palahniuk as a new and important talent, just like BBC's journalist Jayne Margetts who saw in Fight Club "an anthem to our generation who worships at the altar of nihilism and violence."[5]

Reviews of Survivor (1999) were generally favourable, praising Palahniuk's successful attack at the power of mass media, and his witty criticism of artificial celebrities known in the United States as "televangelists." In the Oregonian, Frank Bures claimed that with Survivor Palahniuk "demonstrates his ranges as a writer." Concerning its overall subject, he concluded that "if there is a central theme to Survivor, it is [the] disgust at superficiality and sameness," but the author also skilfully explored other existential matters, like religious hypocrisy, fate and limitations of one's free will.[5] On the other hand, while appreciating "DeLilloesque cultural witticisms and satirical takes on the culture of instant clebrity," Publisher Weekly's Edward Hibbert complained about the "lack of a coherent plot." Still, as the most frequent parable, a number of Survivor reviews mentioned the name of Kurt Vonnegut or Jerzy Kosinski, mainly because of the same vehemence with which Palahniuk describes "the lunacy of the modern world."[5]

Less than six months after the publication of Survivor, critics and reviewers were busy again with Chuck Palahniuk. The reason was called Invisible Monsters (1999). Many experts could not bear the novel's incessant twists and flashbacks which "will make readers punch-drunk by the book's climax. It's Palahniuk's least succesful effort to date, yet there are more than enough moments of insight to recommend [it]," summarized James Sullivan, writing for San Francisco Chronicle.[2] Anouk Hoedeman of the Toronto Sun did not agree with Sullivan, acknowledging that the book was "a guilty pleasure for those with an open mind and a strong stomach." She understood the frequent, if disturbing flashbacks: "The narrative jumps back and forth through time so much that it's sometimes

hard to keep track of what's what. (...) But that's the idea. There's no point to make sense of it all."[2] Jonathan Shipley admitted in his review that although "beautiful wouldn't be the first word that one would use to describe [Palahniuk's] writing style," he undoubtedly is "sharp, witty, clever, and devilishly humorous." Refering to the novel's title he predicted that the author "is not going to be invisible for long."[5]

In a review of Palahniuk's fourth novel Choke (2001) for the New York Times, Janet Maslin experienced the same ambivalent emotions as those who were analysing the writer's debut work Fight Club – she was both frustrated and impressed. She introduced the storyline with the comment that "Mr. Palahniuk is hard to beat if you'd like a working definition of the adolescent male state of mind." Afterwards, she includes him among such authors as Irvine Welsh (of Trainspotting's fame) or J. G. Ballard (the author of the controversial Crash), as "writers equally devoted to bizzare circumstances and the bleakest of humor." Still, Maslin admired "the sheer, anarchic fierceness of imagination that fuels [the book's] wildest individual vignettes."[5]

Similarly, the Observer's Tim Adams concluded that the main hero's "tale is horrific and comic, generally simultaneously."[5] The Publishers Weekly review confessed that "Victor is even more pathetic than Palahniuk's previous antiheroes, in that the world he creates for himself is actually more horrific than the one he seeks to escape." Overall, the novel "showcases the author's powers of description, character development and attention-getting dialogue handily enough to give this dark meditation on addiction a distinctive and humorous twist."[3] Finally, John Foyston from Oregonian complimented Palahniuk on his style by admitting that "his most endearing trait – the thing that keeps me reading – is that marvelous quicksilver voice of his." The same reviewer, although missing more plot, concluded his praise by recommending the book: "The exuberance of [Palahniuk's] language makes it still worthwhile to brave these often chilly and dark waters."[5]

The critical response to Lullaby (2002) noticed Palahniuk's change in thematical direction towards darker and scarier regions. "Lullaby is his latest offering and takes step back from the radical identity crises that defined previous transgressive characters, moving instead into the realms of horror," summarizes the BBC Online review.[2] Newsday's Dan Cryer found the narrative too repetitive, which caused its general incoherence: "The details are marvelous to behold, but that big picture really is missing."[2] Others, like Nicholas Thomas of USA Today, enjoyed the author's "unique views on society and reality," emphasizing his thought-provoking themes which "are more a mental exercise than a blissful retreat," or appreciated his style which "is, as always, dynamic, dense and informative" (Heather Havrilesky in Washington Post). Thomas closed his review with a gratifying comment on the novel's conclusion when he wrote that it "ultimately intertwines and explains its twists while presenting a chilling theme with malevolent characters – characters you eventually find yourself understanding."[2] Lullaby was written as the first part of seemingly horror trilogy. The work is in progress.

3.4. Main characters of Fight Club

The nameless narrator

It has been two years since the main protagonist as well as the narrator of the novel started attending support group meetings, as a result of yet another visit to his doctor about insomnia. And because insomnia is usually nothing but "symptom of something larger" *(19)*, the doctor advised him to listen to his body and get more exercise. Still, the sleep would not come and he felt miserable. The physician then sent him to see some "real pain," the pain of patients dying of cancer who were gathering in the First Eucharist church on every Tuesday. So he went.

He never gives his real name at support groups, and he remains anonymous to the readers of Fight Club, too. He is thirty years old and his

address is never specified. As far as his background is concerned, he comes from a family of frequent arguments and very little affection. When he remembers his childhood, he speaks about passing messages between his estranged parents who never seemed to be in the same room together, thus being almost "invisible to each other," and bitterly concludes that they "never said anything you'd want to embroider on a cushion" *(66)*.

He works as a recall campaign coordinator in a major car company. His office is located in the Compliance and Liability department but most of the time he spends travelling the whole country to inspect wrecked and demolished cars so as to calculate a possible compensation:

> You take the population of vehicles in the field (A) and multiply it by the probable rate of failure (B), then multiply the result by the average cost of an out-of-court settlement.
> A times B times C equals X. This is what it will cost if we don't initiate a recall.
> If X is greater than the cost of a recall, we recall the cars and no one gets hurt.
> If X is less than the cost of a recall, then we don't recall. *(30)*

His life consists of hotel rooms, shifting time zones, restaurant food and tedious flights. He makes tiny friendships with the people sitting beside him on the plane. Refering to the unified portions of food that are served on each and every flight with the same plastic knife and fork, the same salt and pepper bags and the same customized napkins, he calls these aquaintances "single-serving friends" *(31)*. He lives in a confined condominium on the fifteenth floor of a high-rise, "a sort of flailing cabinet for widows and young professionals" *(41)*. To escape the claustrophobia and the boredom of both his place and his life, he surrounds himself with delicate, designer furniture items ordered via phone calls after a careful research of the latest specialized publications. He is aware of the fact that he is a slave to his "nesting instinct" but is certain that he is not alone: "The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue" *(43)*.

At first, he finds some consolation at the support group meetings. What comforts him is the discovery that the attendants really listen to one another, sharing their deepest pains and emotions ("if people thought you were dying, they gave you their full attention" *(106)*). He is even able to sleep again. However, it is only after he meets Tyler Durden that his life changes thoroughly and for good. Together they start fight club, together they work as waiters at snobbish parties, together they experience real feelings of being alive (which has nothing to do with the first class Swedish furniture but with genuine fist fights in dark basements at midnight) and together they decide to elevate the idea of fight club to the next level, whose main aim is to dismantle and rebuild the whole society.

Gradually, thoughts and actions of Tyler Durden and the narrator complement more and more until they merge completely and the narrator realizes that they both are just two sides of the same person and personality. Therefore, the only way of preventing Tyler from executing his destructive plans is to execute Tyler, which by now equals with killing himself.

Tyler Durden

Tyler Durden is the narrator's alter ego. At first he fulfils this role only symbolically but later, as becomes clear near the end of the story, literally as well. He lives in an old ruinous house on the outskirts of town. He works as a part-time film projectionist and occassionaly as a banquet waiter at the luxurious Pressman Hotel. In the former job he inserts single frames of pornographic inages into film reels, in the latter he discreetly spoils food items during prominent dinners. By nature, he is an anarchist who abhors authorities and he has a detailed plan for the New World Order. Everything he does is charged with meaning and a desire to free himself from the society which threatens to change his life into a predefined and controlled event. His opinions are radical, his behaviour is eccentric, and his ideas are provocative.

Tyler's character is the exact opposite of the narrator who admires him, for Tyler acts and behaves in the same way as he would like to behave and act but is not brave enough. Tyler Durden is the chief element of fight club, he is the originator of the idea ("I want you to hit me as hard as you can," he instructs the narrator who asks him how to repay a favour on the first night of fighting *(52)*), he creates the rules and supervises all sesions and fights. He also teaches his best friend a number of useful things, for instance how to make soap and where to obtain a sufficient amount of proper ingredients. After all, the narrator is the best person to see the difference between Tyler and himself:

> I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change the world. Tyler is capable and free, and I am not. *(174)*

Tyler's plans, however, can scare even the most devoted admirer. After Tyler determines to reinvent fight club into Project Mayhem, he tends to be more and more secretive, and continues with his plans on his own. Instead of the leader he becomes "the man behind the scenes," nobody knows about his location or intentions, the only evidence of his activities are flight tickets vouchers, new branches of secret Commitees and newspaper articles mapping the results of "homeworks" or "proposals" completed by Tyler's trainees. Although Tyler is absent, his extensive project continues and his thoughts still reverberate in the narrator's head, until the moment when the narrator decides to stop the destruction with the only possible solution – by killing the worst of him, by killing Tyler Durden.

Marla Singer

The narrator first met Marla at a therapy meeting of Remaining Men Together, which was a support group for patients with testicular cancer. She came to the meeting for similar reasons as the narrator, to find comfort, understanding and affection, she wanted to feel really alive: "All

her life, she never saw a dead person. There was no real sense of life because she had nothing to contrast it with. Oh, but now there was dying and death and loss and grief. Weeping and shuddering, terror and remorse. Now that she knows where we're all going, Marla feels every moment of her life" *(38)*. However, she kept making the narrator nervous for obviously faking the disease. He felt distracted with the presence of another person who was not dying whatsoever, so he suggested they should divide the week's sessions and they exchanged telephone numbers.

Marla stays in the Regent Hotel and lives on the meals delivered by the Meals on Wheels charity to her neighbours who are dead; Marla accepts the food and says that they are asleep. In a case of financial emergency she steals pairs of jeans from dryers in laundromats and then sells them to dealers. No information is given about her family or her education and very little is known about her past. She used to work in the mortuary showroom of a funeral home, helping future customers to choose the right size of crematory urns. When she speaks about herself, she reckons that she is "confused and afraid to commit to the wrong thing so she won't commit to anything." She has "no faith in herself and she's worried that as she grows older, she'll have fewer and fewer options" *(61)*. Still, her pessimism does not prevent her from thinking about the future and the old age. As a practical woman, she diligently saves packets of collagen so as to have enough material for the lip enhancing plastic operation.

She started visiting the support groups after she had discovered a small lump in her breast but decided not to have it examined. "If she was going to die, Marla didn't want to know about it" *(108)*. Given the morbid circumstances of her life, plus her tough and often cynical nature, it is no wonder that her life philosophy is "that she can die at any moment. The tragedy is that she doesn't" *(108)*. Apart from the meetings for the terminally ill, her hobby is commiting suicides from time to time but only when somebody is near enough to save her. After one such attempt ("not a for-real suicide, Marla said, probably just one of those cry-for-help things" *(59)*) she is helped and saved by Tyler Durden and becomes a

frequent guest in the delapidated house on Paper Street as well as in the lives of both Tyler - who spends a night with her but "don't call this *love*" (Palahniuk's italics, *62*) - and the narrator (who only dreams about her but at exactly the same time). The relationship resembles a twisted love triangle where, eventually, "I want Tyler, Tyler wants Marla and Marla wants me," while "I don't want Marla, and Tyler doesn't want me around, not anymore" *(14)*.

Bob

Bob's story signifies a particular tragedy of one of common and anonymous members of Project Mayhem. The narrator first met him at Remaining Men Together. A former successful bodybuilder, whose testicles were removed due to the spreading cancer and who subsequently developed large unwanted breasts because of the hormone support therapy. Medically speaking, his body simply produced too much estrogen as a reaction against the raised level of testosterone. He confides to the narrator about his past and the promising career of a famous champion, remembers his three marriages ("divorce, divorce, divorce" *(21)*) and his two adult sons who wouldn't return his call. During the basement sessions Bob and the narrator often ease their pain together with crying and guided meditations.

When the narrator meets him again after a period of time, Bob is much happier, he is smiling and his muscles are "so hard they shine" *(100)*. Bob explains that the support group has disbanded but there is another group, much better, which is called fight club. He seems to have found a new purpose in life. Nonetheless, he later becomes one of the trained soldiers ("space monkeys") of Tyler's army and he is accidentally killed by the police during a mission. When the other members of Project Mayhem gather to honour his memory, it is revealed that his real name was Robert Paulson and he was fourty-eight years old. After his death, he is no longer anonymous and regains a proper identity because, according to Tyler's rules, after his death he automatically becomes a hero. "One minute,

Robert Paulson was the charm center that the life of the world crowded around," mourns the narrator, "and the next moment, Robert Paulson was an object" *(178)*. He is the first victim of the project, and the first direct evidence that the whole idea outgrew their creator(s) and is now way beyond their powers of control.

3.5. Plot summary of Fight Club

As far as the structure is concerned, the novel consists of 30 untitled chapters. The plot is divided into two parts of almost equal extent, each part including 15 chapters. The first part (106 pages) concentrates on the creation of fight club, the second half of the story (90 pages) focuses on Project Mayhem, the darker and improved version of fight club. Throughout the book, the name "fight club" is considered as the title of the institution, and therefore is referred to without any definite or indefinite articles. Contrarily from other names that appear in the book (brand names, support group titles), however, fight club is written exclusively in small letters.

Part one (chapters 1-15)

The novel begins with the very last scene, where Tyler Durden is about to shoot the narrator. They are standing on top on of the Parker-Morris building which apparently is the world's tallest building. It is exactly ten minutes before the explosion which should destroy all skyscrapers in town (including the Parker-Morris), as planned by the Mischief Commitee of Project Mayhem. The narrator is trying to persuade Tyler not to kill him and explains that it is impossible to tell a story if nobody survives to tell it: "[y]ou want to be a legend, Tyler, I'll make you a legend. I've been here from the beginning. I remember everything" *(15)*. And after this, the narrator recalls the whole history from its start.

Two years ago the narrator began visiting regular therapeutic meetings for terminally ill patients. He did not suffer from any kind of cancer, leukemia or brain parasites but he suffered from insomnia and the lack of sense in life, and the support group meetings helped him to release the pressure, express his emotions and, most importantly, enabled him to sleep. Until he noticed that there was another person like him, pretending to be ill. It was Marla Singer who distracted him so much that he finally asked her to stop coming to the same gatherings and even suggested a system according which they would divide the week's meetings.

At the time, the narrator worked for a major car company and his occupation required frequent flying. When he returned home after yet another tiresome business journey, from some place located several time zones away, he discovered that his flat had been mysteriously destroyed by an explosion. With a minimum of personal belongings and not knowing where else to go he called Tyler Durden, a man whom he met on a nude beach, to ask him for a shelter. They went to a bar and when the narrator insisted to repay the favour somehow, Tyler said, "I want you to hit me as hard as you can" *(46)*. It was the first time they both experienced the excitement of a real fist fight, the authentic feeling of something happening, the surprise and complete exhaustion after the fight was over. After other men came out of the bar and shouted around them in the parking lot, the idea of fight club was born. Since then, the narrator lived in Tyler's rented house on Paper Street. On weekends they would go fighting in the bar basement and every week the place would be more and more crowded with newcomers.

Marla Singer, the woman who "stole the support groups from me" *(53)* met Tyler after he received a phone call where she explained she was dying and needed immediate help. (the call was aimed at the narrator who did not believe her, since Marla was nothing but a notorious "faker" to him. Thus, when she called for the second time, Tyler answered the phone and rushed to Marla's room in the Regent Hotel to save her life). She then started to come to the house on a regular basis, spending nights with

Tyler, flirting with the narrator and storing her supplies of collagen in their freezer. Unfortunately, Tyler used the "collagen trust fund" to make soap. The hand-made soap bars earned Tyler and the narrator enough money to pay the rent but it earned them angry reactions from Marla as well. The collagen belonged to her mother who sent it kindly to Marla so as she could use it for the planned plastic surgery. In a matter of fact, they made soap out of her mother ("You boiled my mother!" *(93)*).

The soap production was not the only Tyler's activity. He worked part-time as a projectionist (with a special weakness for subliminal information) or served delicate food at luxurious parties in the Pressman Hotel, where he protested against his snobbish customers by infecting their food with bodily liquids and by other similarly uninviting procedures. He arranged the same job for the narrator as well, so now they could be even more effective and more inventive.

Meanwhile, fight club spread into a number of chapters around town and began to expand rapidly to other cities. The detective who investigated the condominium explosion informed the narrator that the bomb which destroyed his flat was probably home-made. Marla found a strange lump under her arm and asked the narrator to have a look at it. By doing her this favour, and assuring her that the lump was most probably harmless, the whole collagen affair was finally forgotten. Both Tyler and the narrator also claimed large amounts of money from their bosses for not admitting publicly that they inserted extra frames of pornographic images into hundreds of family films, or tainted the hotel food, respectively.

As the physical power of the main male characters gradually changes from a strength which is used only as a means of authenticity, relaxation and self-realization into a strength used as a tool for pure violence, chaos and destruction, the novel proceeds into its second half.

Part two (chapters 16-30)

The idea of fight club was now transformed into the next stage called Project Mayhem. Tyler invented Project Mayhem one morning when he realized that the fights no longer offered the same pleasure and fullfilment and that it was time to move to something bigger, greater and brand new. The plan was to switch the attention from individuals to the whole planet: "Like fight club does with clerks and box boys, Project Mayhem will break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world" *(125)*. Since then, Tyler established firm rules, just like he invented rules for fight club a long time ago; he created four specialized Commitees (Arson, Assault, Mischief and Misinformaiton) which held meetings on appointed days of the week; began assigning homework and weekly proposals for the commitee members and started to train a small personal army of dedicated volunteers ("space monkeys") who were willing to do anything to complete the task and to work towards the common aim, which was the New World Order.

The narrator automatically becomes a member of Project Mayhem but it is Tyler who is considered the leader. The narrator cannot influence the development and particular missions anymore. "This is what Tyler wants me to do," he realizes. "These are Tyler's words coming out of my mind. I am Tyler's mouth. I am Tyler's hands. Everybody in Project Mayhem is part of Tyler Durden, and vice versa" *(155)*. By now, the homework assignments and proposals include damaging works of art, fighting random people on the street, bringing "human sacrifices" and preventing closures of fight club chapters by threatening city officials with castration. Tyler disappears and when the narrator travels the country to find him, in every place where he stops people seem to recognize him, he is called "sir" and members of fight clubs hurry to inform him about the latest progress of a local Project Mayhem team. However, nobody has seen Tyler ("is this a test, sir?" *(158)*) who finally returns only to confirm the narrator's doubts about his true nature: they are not two separate men, they are two sides of the same split personality. "When you're awake, you

have the control, and you can call yourself anything you want, but the second you fall asleep, I take over, and you become Tyler Durden" *(167)*.

The narrator is aware that it is necessary to stop Project Mayhem with its absurd laws and disband fight clubs before the whole idea becomes too dangerous. Besides, the project has already seen its first victim – Big Bob, the narrator's friend from the support group meetings who later joined Tyler's army and was accidentally killed by the police. This is not what the narrator wanted and it is painful to know that he is responsible for the situation, for the riots, for the explosion in his office (he wanted to quit the job, thus actually "giving Tyler permission" to change his computer into a powerful bomb), even for the destruction of his own condominium.

The night when they invented fight club, he did not fight Tyler but he was fighting everything that he hated in his life. And the insomnia was nothing but tiredness from living two lives simultaneously, working two jobs, going to fight clubs or preparing the Project asignments. However, knowing this does not mean that he could take control over Tyler's actions and make him disappear. On the contrary, Tyler is determined now to kill or kidnap or castrate all enemies of Project Mayhem, so the narrator's only chance is to destroy Tyler. And he needs Marla to help him. It is difficult to persuade her about the doubled identity, for she does not know the difference between Tyler and the narrator but she eventually agrees to follow "Tyler" after the narrator falls asleep, so that he could possibly "undo the damage" the next morning.

Still, what Marla witnesses that night is just another murder and she clearly saw the narrator commiting the crime. It is therefore impossible for her to trust him anymore. That is why the narrator decides to have himself killed by visiting fight club and registering to fight with every single member. Although terribly beaten, severely injured and exhausted by the fights which he purposely desired to lose, he is awaken by his alter ego in his room on Paper Street. It is the night when all the skyscrapers in

town should be destroyed by the members of Project Mayhem, and Tyler's plan is to kill the narrator on top of the tallest building prior to the lethal explosion ("a real opera of a death, that's what you're going to get" *(203)*). As the two heroes are standing on the roof of the Parker-Morris building, the novel returns back to the moment where it commenced.

Marla attempts to stop the narrator from killing himself – of course, Tyler disappears when she enters the roof and "now I'm just one man holding a gun in my mouth" *(204)* – but although the building does not explode in the end and Marla swears that she does know the difference between the two identities, the narrator pulls the trigger. The last chapter then resembles an epilogue, in which the narrator recalls what happened after he (and Tyler) "died." It is not specified whether he is in heaven or in a medical centre but the latter is more likely, for "the angels here are the Old Testament kind, legions and lieutenants, a heavenly host who works in shifts. (...) They bring you your meals on a tray with a paper cup of meds" and God is sitting at his "long chestnut desk with his diplomas hanging on the wall behind him" *(207)*. The narrator admits that from time to time, he still meets people with bruised faces or stitches who wink at him knowingly, whisper his name ("we miss you, Mr. Durden") and assure him that everything is going according to the plan.

3.6. Main themes

3.6.1. You are not your culture

> You have a class of young strong men and women, and they want to give their lives to something. Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they don't need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need. We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives. We have a spiritual depression. *(149)*

At the beginning of the novel, the nameless narrator complains about severe insomnia but the truth is that he only suffers from a lack of real life. Although he is a good, successful and contributing member of society who works a decent job providing him with sufficient financial stability, he still feels as if something were missing. To fill the void, he surrounds himself with the first class and first quality objects. The list of his most treasured possessions includes mostly furniture items, occassionally enriched with some precious dishwasher-safe cutlery service. Such things are supposed to help him make his life "complete" and "perfect."

Apart from the narrator, this attitude represents thousands of other nameless members of contemporary American society who live their lives of quiet desperation within the walls of everyday routines and alienated consumerism. David Fincher, the director of the film version of Fight Club, defines such situation as "the IKEA reality" (refering to the Swedish manufacturer of convenient, user-friendly furniture). According to him, we are "predestined by nature to become hunters and explorers, instead we live in a culture which is devoted merely to shopping. There is nothing left to discover, to fight with, to explore, there are no more challenges to take. And the main character was shaped and raised by this weakened culture" (Fincher, 34).

The narrator also represents a generation of people who were raised with great expectations and now they realize that their hopes and dreams will most likely remain unfulfilled: “We are the middle children of history, raised by television to believe that someday we’ll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won’t. And we’re just learning this fact” *(166)*. In the world where the greatest dose of emotions is being regularly delivered by the mass media, where “we don’t have friends, so we watch Friends on TV,”[2] and where almost every pleasure and excitement can be purchased with credit cards, the narrator longs for a change. He needs to escape his frustration, he is anxious for a solution to his inner emptiness and he hopes that somebody may have the correct answers for his burning existential questions.

The one who listens to his prayers (“Deliver me from Swedish furniture. Deliver me from clever art. May I never be complete. May I never be content. May I never be perfect” *(46)*) is Tyler Durden. His philosophy defies the conventional standards of society, his main idea states that a complete destruction is essential in order to rebuild and his motto is “The things you own may end up owning you” *(48)*. By Tyler’s laws, material objects become parts of our lives only to fill and fulfill our empty existences and to comfort us with a false impression of perfection. Throughout the book, he keeps presenting the readers as well as his new friend with small pieces of advice, with his private universal truths, such as:

> You’re not your job. You’re not your family, and you’re not who you tell yourself. You’re not your name. You are not your sad little wallet. *(143; 152)*

The first step towards becoming a better person with a purpose in life is thus trading all the personal belongings and cherished possessions for something more lasting, profound and authentic. That is why the turning point in the narrator’s life comes after the explosion which comlpetely destroys his home as well as the entire collection of his delicate furnishings. Self-destruction becomes a way to self-improvement. The

chains of materialism are broken and the path to the new life is clear. It is time for the main, nameless character to experience the real emotions and escape from the frustration of senseless life and invented values, the frustration which made him create Tyler Durden.

3.6.2. Absent fathers and insecure men

> Me, I knew my dad for about six years, but I don't remember anything. My dad, he starts a new family in a new town about every six years. This isn't so much like a family as it's like he sets up a franchise. *(50)*

> The mechanic says, "If you're male and you're Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do yu believe about God?" *(141)*

Chuck Palahniuk projected many of his own experiences into the story of Fight Club. One particular theme occurred during a number of conversations with his friends. Just like him, they often mentioned that they were raised without their fathers, which eventually resulted in the lack of a strong role model in their lives. They missed someone who would present them with any reasonable idea of what it meant to be a man.

Broadly speaking, fathers have always been considered as the ones who lead their sons from the early days to the maturity of adulthood. They are supposed to show their offspring a direction, to teach them about options, and to explain the differences between the right way and the misleading, wrong path of life. Fathers should impersonate someone who is not only admired by his children but whose principles are later taken a step further by them and developed. With fathers mostly absent, however, there is nobody to follow and the grown-up children feel hopeless, lost in the hostile world and without a clue how to become proper fathers themselves. This situation is evoked in the text of the novel, too. The narrator ultimately finds his father-figure in Tyler Durden, and through

the impact of fight club Tyler gradually becomes a role model for countless other men.

Like the narrator's insomnia, which is supposedly a "symptom of something larger" *(19)*, the problem of absent fathers also signifies a larger and more serious phenomenon. According to Susan Faludi, a feminist and a journalist, it is an evidence of the general crisis of the concept of manhood in the contemporary America. Faludi presumes that in the past masculinity was defined as how much a man contributed to the community or country in which he lived. Men participated in public life, while dutifully protecting and supporting their families. They were integrated into a wider social system and all of the domains of their power, control and authority were esentially societal.

Nevertheless, during the nineteenth century, the concept of American manhood was slowly shifted by becoming more focused on a possession that needed to be required, rather than the importance of public good and general usefulness. Moreover, in the second half of the twentieth century, the exclusive men-only dominance and control over all crucial issues as well as property began to be challenged by women who demanded equal treatment and in many situations simply overtook the power.

Nowadays, instead of being constantly "in charge," men experience constant feelings of uncertainty. Apart from the societal position, which is weakened by the healthy competition of women right activists, there is another dangerous factor which contributes to the crisis of male identity. It is the idealized "image" of a successful man which is incessantly presented by the media, emphasized by magazine covers, delivered by superficial action heroes and glamorous celebrities, or defined with the toughness of perfect perfumed models from Celvin Klein megabillboards. Faludi draws an example from a picture in a 1994 Time magazine, depicting a man in an expensive business suit, wearing a golden wedding ring and with a big shiny smile upon his face. While it is a clear indication of a content person who is undoubltedly "in control," it leaves

"unexamined the American man's more common experience of fear at losing the job that requires the business suit, the family for whom he wears the ring, or any context in which to embed his life" (Faludi, 13).

Fight Club portrays men who are both gaining and losing their masculinity. At first, there are crying and broken men suffering from testicular cancer. The same motif appears later in a different context, when the enemies of Project Mayhem are threatened with castation. There are support groups where its attendants are repeatedly taught to escape from the pain, not to "even think of the word" *(75)*, versus the utterly masculine experiences of fight clubs, in which the members learn to bear the pain, to focus on it and face it.

Men are under enormous pressure and they are unable to expres it, since revealing one's emotions would not be very "manly." They are expected to solve their problems alone, in seclusion, and internally. In addition, the American man lives in a culture which "reshapes his most basic sense of manhood by telling him that masculinity is something to drape over body, not draw from inner resources; that it is personal, not societal; that manhood is displayed, not demonstrated. The internal qualities once said to embody manhood – surefootedness, inner strength, confidence of purpose – are merchandised to men to enhance their manliness" (Faludi, 35).

The whole concept of manhood is dangerously reversed mainly because the troubled men do not share their confusion and frustration, thus not dealing with the problems effectively but only postponing and diminishing chances for reasonable solutions. There is a little help for those who struggle to compete with Celvin Klein-esque figures in the world where the thirst for life is nothing but a cool enough "image" is everything. However, those who are willing to stop pretending and start demonstrating what it really means to be a man, they are warmly welcome in fight club, a support group for males who may have lost their compass in the world but still search for a direction.

3.6.3. The fight for authenticity

> I felt finally I could get my hands on everything in the world that didn't work, my cleaning that came back with the collar button broken, the bank that says I'm hundreds of dollars overdrawn. My job where my boss got on my computer and fiddled with my DOS execute commands. And Marla Singer, who stole the support groups from me. Nothing was solved when the fight was over, but nothing mattered. *(53)*

In the excerpt, the narrator describes the much-anticipated relief which comes after every night he spends in fight club. Initially, he escapes his dull and stationary existence by visiting meetings for patients in terminal stages of mortal diseases, mingling with people who lost everything and are about to lose the only remaining treasure – their life – in a very short period of time. Still, the awareness of the situation makes them honest, empathic and absolutely open. The narrator has no intentions to enjoy their tragedy, or to comfort himself with the stories of people who feel even more desperate than he does. He visits the church basement to experience the human warmth, otherwise so absent from his life, and he longs to express his hopelessness to someone who would like to listen (in exchange for the other person's sad story). "This is why I loved the support groups so much, if people thought you were dying, they gave you their full attention" *(107)*.

After the narrator meets Tyler Durden, he starts frequenting a different basement, this time to experience something utterly new, refreshing and all the more authentic. Fight club resembles an unofficial therapy gatherings for frustrated middle-class McJob workers, computer geeks, accountants, waiters, fast food operators and other ordinary men who are simply not satisfied with the state of the world and with the direction in which it is taking them. It is a place of regular rituals for those who decided not to die "without a scar," without living through something real and something worthwhile. According to the author (Chuck Palahniuk, that is, not Tyler Durden, for once), fight club is "a social model for men to gather and share their lives,"[8] a straight parralel to dancing bars where

it is possible to ask someone for a waltz. This club is a strictly defined space in which everybody can ask another member for a fight.

The idea of fight club is not meant to function as a celebration of mindless violence. It is more a gladiatorial contest, or a reminder of masculinity which is now nearly on the verge of extinction, having been numbed by safety, smoothness and political correctness of consumerism, helpful electronic devices, useful household utilities and special offers on discounted antidepresssants. It is based on a fight as a natural activity, akin to teasing playfulness of dogfights or sport meetings of Olympic wrestlers who are "the most violent people for seven minutes and the rest of their lives they are so centered, so cool, so peaceful."[2] Such people often speak about the post-fight release, the complete emotional and physical exhaustion and the best way of relaxation. Moreover, fight club is a chance to vent the aggression and negativity that would otherwise be expressed in some other (and undoubtedly more dangerous) way, be it domestic violence, random drive-by shooting or physical elimination of high school classmates.

The main aim of the fights in Fight Club is not winning or losing because the figters do not fight their opponents, they deal with anything that they hate or disagree with. Even the reward which they gain from the physical and intense event is different from other displays of violence. There is a certain calmness and ease with the world, emphasized with the mutual respect of the fighters who shake hands, compliment each other on the fight and may become best friends. It is an authentic and cleansing experience which "doesn't happen in words" *(51)*.

Palahniuk's idea has reportedly spawned several real fight club chapters both in the United States and Europe. The writer himself, however, confessed in a 1999 interview that he feels most honoured when people come to him at public readings and say, "the book made me go back to school and get my degree,"[5] refering to a particular Project Mayhem

homework assignment, in which Tyler asks everybody to bring him twelve driving licenses.

The narrator chooses Raymond K. Hessel, a local shop assistant on a night shift, discovers his expired student card (Hessel is a former biology student who intended to become a veterinarian), and while aiming a gun at him, makes him promise that he will return back to school and finish his education, otherwise he shall be killed. His progress will be now checked regularly. And as the future student runs home to rethink his life and find a way out of his no-job with "just enough money to buy cheese and watch television" *(155)*, the narrator thinks to himself:

> Raymond K. Hessel, your dinner is going to taste better than any meal you've ever eaten, and tomorrow will be the most beautiful day of your entire life. *(155)*

Note.

It only remains to express a fervent hope that Mr. Tyler Durden and his colleagues from the secret organization about which it is not advised to ask any questions whatsoever will kindly excuse the author of this paper for breaking the very first rule of fight club; the first rule about fight club is you don't talk about fight club *(48)*.

4. Comparison

4.1. Setting

Generation X as well as Fight Club are set in the United States of America, in spite of the fact that Douglas Coupland is Canadian and one of his characters, Dag, is a Canadian expatriate. America of the 1990's is a suitable place for novels about the numbing conformity of spreading consumerism and about everyday experiences of a large group of young citizens who are confused and disillusioned with the current state of society handed to them by their parents.

America of the time is a perfect example of a superpower which is capable of influencing and controling the whole world and at the same time dealing with immense domestic problems, with deminishing economy, political chaos, racial prejudice, irresistible TV reality and merciless commercialism with colourful discount leaflets being distributed straight in everyone's letter boxes instead of newspapers. And the emerging generation would like to do something about the condition.

The narrator of Fight Club lives at first in a cosy condominium, later moving to stay with his friend Tyler in an old, dilapidated house on Paper Street. That is the complete information, as far as the location is concerned. The town remains anonymous (although it is probably one of the biggest American cities, since it has the tallest building in the world). The address is not to be specified, which is the same rule that applies to the character of the narrator. Thus, the story could happen everywhere and, more importantly, to everybody. The unidentified narrator may borrow every single reader's identity and make the impact of the story all the more powerful.

Tyler's house on Paper Street is located on the outskirts of town, outside from the buzz of business centers, far from shopping malls where the rush hour never ends, and remote from curious neighbours. It is an ideal place for Tyler's plans concerning the self-improvement by the means of utter self-destruction. He will start with himself and his new friend, and in the end they shall change the whole world. The Paper Street house already hides a private army of dedicated "space monkeys" who are preparing for a brand new beginning.

The setting of Generation X is very specific and unusual. The three friends reside in a retirement community in Palm Springs, California, surrounded by the desert. According to Frances FitzGerald, who researched similar locations for her book on contemporary American subcultures, such resorts "are without a precedent. No society recorded in history has ever had whole villages – whole cities – composed exclusively of elderly people" (FitzGerald, 212). Palm Springs represents a place invented entirely for the needs of its residents, a place which is comfortably removed from crowded cities, hectic highways and, most of the time, devoid of tourists. It is a town with its own rhythm and rules, where the inhabitants enjoy as much privacy and anonymity as they possibly require.

It also is a place "with no history," where all the social distinctions merge and where one's own past does not matter, contrarily, it is only important what the present brings. It is not common for young people to live in a community of the retired who choose such locations to relax after a life of work and fullfilment. However, Andy, Dag and Claire came to Palm Springs because of the atmosphere of peace, undisturbed independence and the feeling of permanent vacation. Moreover, "there is no middle class, and in that sense the place is medieval" *(12)*.

FitzGerald would add that they search for "freedom from social restrictions, and even from society itself" (FitzGerald, 232). The three friends also came here because of the concept of "no history." They long

to free themselves from their past, which is essential for a brand new start and for a new life towards which they subsequently depart. The main protagonists of both novels live outside of societal centers, in seclusion, so that they could concentrate on themselves, their activities, the future, the fights or the bedtime stories.

4.2. Narrative

Nowadays, books as a medium carrying a message must unwillingly compete with other means of entertainment which are incomparably easier to access and digest – special edition video tapes, computer games, dozens of TV channels, interactive DVD menus or professional wrestling matches. For a writer to succeed and his book to be noticed, it is necessary to attract readers' attention and keep them interested under all circumstances. "And these people want plot. [Readers] don't want stasis and description. They want the plot to move. They want lots of verbs," reveals his own strategy Chuck Palahniuk.

Accordingly, Fight Club is economical in descriptions, action is clearly a more important criterion. In most scenes, the author manages to create a mood or explain a situation with a few well-chosen words. The novel is generally built with simple but powerful phrases which are often repeated for rhythm and used to further characterize a particular character. For emphasis, Palahniuk works with capital letters ("HELLO! Look at me. HELLO! I am so ZEN. This is BLOOD. This is NOTHING. Hello. Everything is nothing, and it's so cool to be ENLIGHTENED. Like me" *(64)*) as well as italics:

> *Please*.
> Say it.
> *Please* comes out in a bubble of blood.
> Say it.
> Please.
> And the bubble pops blood all over. *(117)*

Coupland's writing style is influenced by his descriptive, journalistic talent and an immense sense of detail. The text of Generation X is full of inventive multi-word phrases and supported by newly coined vocabulary placed along the pages, which creates the impression of a genuine manifold guide to a new generation, a work of fiction functioning as a sociological study at the same time.

Coupland frequently uses partial italics to emphasize the word stress (gaso*line*, de *fa*cto, Nos*trad*amus, *fa*cial expression) or italicises whole words to simulate the common speech intonation. He also employs the paragraph symbol (sometimes called a pragraph tag, or a pilcrow) at beginnnings of chapters, which helps him dynamize the text. Some paragraphs are thus not structured traditionally, however, thanks to the pilcrow the text proceeds fluently while the information is divided according to the immediate needs and the rhythm of narration:

> "Andy." Dag prods me with a greasy chicken bone, bringing me back to the picnic. "Stop being so quiet. It's your turn to tell a story, and do me afavour, babe – give me a dose of celebrity content." ¶ "Do amuse us, darling," adds Claire. "You're being so moody." ¶ Torpor defines my mood as I sit on the crumbling, poxed, and leprous never-used macadam at the corner of Cotonwood and Saphire avenues, thinking my stories to myself and crumbling pungent sprigs of sage in my fingers. "Well, my brother Tyler, once shared an elevator with David Bowie." ¶ "How many floors?" ¶ "I don't know. All I remember is that Tyler had no idea what to say to him. So he said nothing." ¶ "I have found," says Claire, "that in the absence of anything to talk about with celebrities, you can always say to them, `Oh, Mr. Celebrity! I've got all your albums` - even if they're not musicians." ¶ Look –" says Dag, turning his head," some people are actually driving down here." *(59)*

The plot of Generation X is narrated from Andy's point of view, past events are recollected in a natural way by memories unfolded either in the bedtime stories or remembered by Andy. The other characters control the narration only while they tell a story themselves. Otherwise, their feelings or opinions are not disclosed to the readers, everything is percieved exclusively through Andy's eyes and thoughts.

The story of Fight Club is also narrated by its main character but incoherently and unchronologically (it is the writer's intention not the lack of craft). The plot shifts back and forth in time in instant flashbacks, sometimes within a few sentences. The rhythm of the text often depicts the narrator's stream of consciousness. Palahniuk uses the first, the second and the third person for narrative purposes almost simultaneously; he works effectively with images that are likely to transform the reader into another protagonist of the novel. For instance, when the narrator recalls an incident, his words are aimed at his victim but the whole monologue seems as if it was directed towards the readers: "You didn't even say, hello. (...) You gave me your wallet like I asked. (...) Oh, you didn't know" *(153)*.

In multiple situations, the readers follow several characters and actions at the same moment, which gives the story almost three-dimensional, film scene quality. Moreover, inverted commas are never used for the narrator's direct speech, which blurs the difference between a thought and an actual utterance, further supporting the uncertainty of the main character's identity.

Both the authors use their narrative strategies successfully and they are capable of attracting the attention of wide audiences. They understand their generation, use its language patterns efficiently and are accurate in locating its joys and current problems. "You see yourself in his writing,"[4] praised Coupland's writing skills John Battelle, managing editor of Wired magazine. Similarly, Palahniuk confirms that he has heard from readers who never fancied reading before they saw his books. Maybe the battle for books representing a medium still carrying a message is not over yet.

4.3. Themes

The crucial theme for both Coupland and Palahniuk is the perception of the contemporary popular culture and its direct impact on individuals. In both novels, young people in their late twenties search for a meaning of their existence, they seek for a certain sense which would eventually anchor and justify their lives in the world approaching the end of the twentieth century. They share a desire to explore any sensible option before it is too late, since the term "the future" has never seemed this terrifying, and without immediate action initiated by themselves the prospects for their meaningful life (and lives of the whole Generation X, naturally) will keep diminishing.

Moreover, the novels describe a culture in which traditional values and means of support, like family or love, show to be dysfunctional and unreliable. This is the first generation of men raised by women, declares the narrator in Fight Club, summarizing the common experience of many contemporary Americans (although it may be discussed that in the rest of the world the situation is fairly similar). Children grow up in incomplete families and are often not ready to enter the world, as there is nobody to prepare them for the entrance. Tyler does not know his father whatsoever, Marla never mentions her family, and the narrator remembers long-distance calls to his father, whom he tried to ask for advice at important moments of his life, and which always ended with the same answer ("My dad didn't know" *(51)*). He also depicts his absent father as a man who starts a new family in a new town every six months, thus resembling a travelling business creating franchises of his bankrupting company.

Andy's family is still present and complete, however, his attachment to them is not very strong, and his parents do not seem to offer him any understanding or proper emotional support. "Already, after ten minutes, any spiritual or psychic progress I may have made in the absence of my family has vanished or been invalidated" *(159)* he sadly presumes during

his Christmas visit in the parents' house. Like most of other gen-Xers and fight clubbers, he feels alienated from the family and, unfortunately, the feeling is mutual.

Not even love can be percieved as a certainty. Generation X's Claire temporarily suffers through an affair with Tobias but otherwise it is only friendship which can last, and, according to Andy, does simplify life. Similarly, in Fight Club love is substituted with mere sympathy ("it's not love but I like you" *(205)*). Marla certainly experienced a few relationships but their depth and sincerity is questionable, and now the former lovers serve only as a source for her ironic microstories, commencing every time with "I dated a guy once who..." (liked to wear her clothes, could not get enough piercing, had terrible nightmares, etc.). Regardless of Marla's profound affection for the narrator at the end of the story, the emotion cannot stop his culminating personal tragedy.

The main heroes of the two books attempt to locate their existential emergency exit by using strategies and elements which deny conventional rules of contemporary society. They react to the ruthless, technologically and informationally overloaded culture of happy shoppers by retreating either into remote places in the desert (Palm Springs) or into dark and cold basements, where they concentrate on precious transcendent moments of authenticity and where they are able to experience the magic feeling of still being alive.

The protagonists of Generation X find their comfort and enlightenment in "bedtime stories" that help them understand the harsh world around them and enable them to fantasize about a better place at the same time. Dag, Claire, and Andy also draw their inner strength to cope with the almost dehumanized cultural environment from nature and its timeless beauty, be it the first experience of snow, the phenomenon of the sun eclipse, or a majestic white elk circling proudly around a burnt field. The members of Fight Club, on the other hand, choose a more radical way of reminding

themselves about reality. They prefer discovering the genuineness of living through physical, direct contacts with similarly desperate human beings: the narrator feels satisfied and relaxed after evenings in medical support groups, sharing his emotions with incurable patients, and he feels equally fulfilled after intense nights in fight club.

The difference in approaches towards possible solutions of the main characters' situation is further illustrated by Palahniuk's recent quote concerning hope versus determination. "I see hope as [a] rather pointless, amorphous emotion. Hope doesn't accomplish anything. Action accomplishes something. Sitting around hoping for something doesn't do much."[5] His heroes in Fight Club do not hesitate to take their fates into their own hands by creating fight club and later improving its idea with Project Mayhem. Whereas the three friends from Generation X mainly wait for something to happen and meditate about the world via their storytelling, Tyler Durden challenges the world and registers in a fight against it. It makes Palahniuk's novel generally more violent and straightforward but highly effective.

In Generation X, the only direct actions against the unfair living conditions and contagious consumer habits are Dag's small riot acts of vandalism. Occasionally, he demolishes luxurious cars, especially those which display annoying fender stickers ("We're spending our children's inheritance,"*(5)* for instance). However, this particular activity would certainly please Tyler Durden, since one of his Project Mayhem homework assignments concerned a team of "space monkeys" who "stormed through a better neighbourhood and a luxury car dealership slamming baseball bats against the front bumpers of cars so the air bags inside would explode in a powdery mess with their car alarms screaming" *(132)*.

It is not only vehicles which are subject to criticism. The overall excessive preoccupation with material objects is stressed in both books as one of the most essential problems of today's America. Both novels try to emphasize that it is of no importance whatsoever how many items we

manage to collect during our lives, what exactly our precious cars or latest mobile phones or delicate cutlery services look like. Such things of passing exclusivity and a relative value only distract us from important and lasting qualities, using the energy which we should best put towards higher and incomparably more sensible achievements.

When Dag wants to cleanse himself from all pressures of society, first of all he disposes of his possessions. His friend Andy behaves similarly when he feels he needs "less things" around him, and later demands no Christmas presents at all, declaring that he is "getting rid of all the things in my life" *(123)*, which worries his consumerist brother Tyler very much. In Fight Club, the narrator's condominium is demolished with no regrets by another Tyler, Tyler Durden, because the narrator is too attached to his beloved furniture items. Only then is he able to start a new life and accomplish his liberation. In Tyler's fashion, the whole story keeps reminding the readers that we are not our property.

Similarly, another fashionable obsession which is tackled in both of the stories is the popular trend of body fanaticism, or, as filed by Coupland, "Dorian Graying" (the unwillingness to gracefully allow one's body to show signs of aging *(190)*). If people of a certain social class become rich enough, they begin to treat their body like their car or an evening dress which can be changed or remodelled according to the latest fashion as often as it is necessary. The physical beauty and a perfect time-proof appearance is vital, which encourages a number of inventive individuals to create a whole new field of industry focused purely on various implants, improvements, enlargements, enhancements, etc.

One of the first scenes of Generation X describes Andy's two dogs who have just been rummaging through the dumpsters behind a cosmetic surgery centre and their snouts are covered with something which is identified by Andy as "dare I say, yuppie liposuction fat" *(4)*. The same product of the quest for neverfading beauty plays an important part in Fight Club, where Tyler and the narrator use the liposuction fat as an

ingredient for making their famous soap. They even use the supplies of body collagen which Marla, ironically, saves incautiously in their freezer for a planned lip operation. Otherwise, however, they use the "richest, creamiest fat in the world, the fat of the land," stored in medical waste centers. Then, they sell the fat in the form of a first-quality hand-made soap back to the very people who paid a large sum of money to have it removed. "At twenty bucks a bar, these are the only folks who can afford it" *(150)*.

It has been mentioned that the protagonists of Generation X choose a different, if more passive strategy of dealing with their situation than their counterparts from Fight Club, who prefer the path of active resistance. The effectiveness of contrary attitudes is completely reversed by the open endings of both novels. After a relatively stagnant period, Dag and Claire finally leave Palm Springs for Mexico (with their best friend Andy following suit shortly afterwards) to start a new life by becoming hoteliers. Although the consequences of that decision are unknown, it certainly is a promise of a new beginning. Their hope is still alive and at this moment it is achievable.

The narrator of Fight Club, nonetheless, ends at the same point where he began – when the whole idea of rebuilding society by the way of its complete destruction proves to be wrong and no longer in control of their creators, he finds himself in a medical institution, unable to cope with the stark reality once again. Whether he only chose a false direction, or not, the closing paragraphs do not reveal. It is left upon the consideration of readers.

The authors mirror and analyze the contemporary America without shaping any particular solutions. They raise questions, provoke discussions and address issues that might be disturbing and offending but need to attract our attention. Neither Palahniuk nor Coupland finish their debut novels with some well-defined, articulate messages; they are reluctant to impersonate preachers, they function only as skillful commentators and verbal photographers of the Generation X. Therefore, both of the endings remain unclear and open. “A lot like life,” Dag would say, very likely.

5. Conclusion

The works of Douglas Coupland and Chuck Palahniuk introduce a generation which is no longer part of the Baby Boom but still fails to be precisely distinguished and defined. The people who belong to this specific social and age group seem to linger somewhere in the middle of two distinct approaches to the contemporary America: they cannot subscribe to the values and lifestyle of the generation which preceded them, while at the same time they are mature enough to resent the idealistc optimism of the younger generation which is about to follow them (in Coupland's novel, this "generation next" is called "the Global Teens" and represented by the main character's teenage brother Tyler).

Both Generation X and Fight Club describe people who are well aware of the current state of society, they realize that they do participate in its development and they search for the right way of changing the world for the better. Coupland was among the first writers who depicted and characterized the members of Generation X (his debut was published in 1991), moreover, he managed to capture the typical irony which the Gen-Xers use as a powerful weapon against the hostile world and which helps them evaluate their gloomy everyday experiences.

Palahniuk's debut was published five years later and apart from a similarly accurate depiction of the Generation X, it portrays characters who are determined to recreate the whole corporate American society by its total destruction. Even though the radical and straightforward attitude of Fight Club differs from the generally peaceful and relatively passive Coupland's novel, the main thematic concern is identical. The protagonists of both stories refuse to waste their precious lives on collecting property, partaking in shopping therapies and living on monetary achievements. Instead, they focus on possible solutions and purely anti-consumerist activities, be it story telling, relaxing trips to the

desert, emotional therapies amidst dying patients or bare-nuckled fist fights in dark basements.

This work was structured to analyse two significant novels which succeeded to capture the spirit of our times. Additionally, its task was to introduce two authors who strongly oppose to the label of “voices of the generation,” yet are exact at addressing crucial issues of the western society. In their writings, both Coupland and Palahniuk comment tirelessly on the latest cultural progress and keep supplying their readers with punctual definitions of major millenial virtues as well as vices. Thanks to them, the Generation X can no longer be considered “lost.” On the contrary, it has been found, discovered and prompted to act. One of the main and basic goals of literature has thus been successfully accomplished.

6. Czech summary

Hlavním úkolem této diplomové práce je představit dva spisovatele, kteří ve svých dílech popisují nastupující generaci mladých Američanů. První z nich, Douglas Coupland, pochází z Kanady. Byl jedním z prvních autorů, kteří charakterizovali specifickou skupinu dospívajících a čerstvě dospělých lidí, hlásících se o slovo jen několik let před přelomem tisíciletí. Tato skupina se vyznačovala mnoha společnými rysy, postoji a pocity, ale ještě neměla své jméno. Coupland jejich situaci popsal ve svém prvním románu, vybral pro ně název Generace X a konečně je tak vymanil z tíživého stínu jejich rodičů, takzvaných „baby boomers."

Druhým autorem je Chuck Palahniuk, který svoji románovou prvotinu Fight Club představil v roce 1996. Od té doby neúnavně a přesně popisuje problémy a citlivá místa dnešní Ameriky a celé „své" generace, strefuje se do prázdných životů zdánlivě superúspěšných lidí a zpochybňuje hodnoty, které tito konzumenti života vyznávají. Stejně jako jeho kanadský kolega, i Palahniuk hledá cestu ven z přetechnizované a komerční společnosti a snaží se říkat „věci, které překvapují, v kultuře, kde je tak těžké vůbec někoho něčím překvapit" (Adamovič, 5). Nesnaží se být programově cynický či bez náznaku naděje, má jen obrovský pozorovací talent a otevírá tak oči ostatním.

Náplní první části této práce je dílo Douglase Couplanda, s důrazem na Generation X. Po shrnutí jeho dosavadní tvůrčí činnosti a reakcí odborné kritiky následuje bližší pohled na dějovou linku Generation X, podrobná charakterizace hlavních postav a rozbor hlavních témat románu. Druhá část se zabývá představením tvorby Chucka Palahniuka, jeho nejdůležitějšími díly a následnými kritickými ohlasy. Pozornost je poté soustředěna na Fight Club a kniha je dále analyzována dle stejných kritérií jako v části první. Poslední, třetí část je věnována srovnání obou románů, jejich styčným či rozdílným bodům, ať už v kontextu tématickém, situačním či narativním.

Douglas Coupland se narodil v roce 1962 jako kanadský občan na vojenské základně v německém Baden-Söllingenu, kde jeho otec sloužil jako profesionální voják. Dětství však strávil v Kanadě, ve Vancouveru, kde s přestávkami žije dodnes. Je uznávaným výtvarníkem, aktivním žurnalistou a úspěšným spisovatelem (od roku 1991, kdy vyšla Generation X, publikoval celkem jedenáct knih, kromě beletrie se jedná i o dvě sbírky povídek, eseje a novinové články).

Mezi jeho hlavní díla patří kritikou vřele přijatá Generation X, volně navazující novela Shampoo Planet (1992), precizní sonda do života programátorů Microsoftu s názvem Microserfs (1995), či Girlfriend in a Coma (1998), temný příběh o dívce, která stráví osmnáct let života v komatu a probouzí se tak do značně rozdílného světa. Zatím nejaktuálnějším románem je Hey, Nostradamus! (2003), zabývající se následky tragické školní přestřelky, ne nepodobné masakru na střední škole Columbine v roce 1999.

Generation X má v podtitulu název „tales for an accelerated culture“ (v českém překladu vyšlo pod názvem Generace X: Vyprávění pro akcelerovanou kulturu) a původně měla být koncipována jako stylizovaný průvodce světem a životem převážně dvacetiletých Američanů. Coupland však zadání svého vydavatele nesplnil a namísto toho napsal román, ve kterém tři přátelé vymění hektické metropole a televizní realitu za poklidné letovisko v kalifornském Palm Springs, kde si navzájem vyprávějí příběhy. Jako určitý „návod k použití“ ovšem kniha působí i nadále, jelikož Coupland vyzdobil okraje stran četnými slogany, definicemi a nákresy, které vystihují a dovysvětlují text a tudíž i celou generaci X. Písmeno, které v matematice obvykle značí neznámou hodnotu či výsledek přitom autor zvolil záměrně, protože tato skupina je v jeho očích opravdu velkou neznámou a na pravé a přesnější označení stále ještě čeká.

Jedním z hlavních témat Couplandovy knihy je tedy hledání smyslu a uplatnění v současném světě, ať už má být nalezen během očistných výletů do pouště, prostřednictvím vymyšlených i skutečně prožitých příběhů či finálního odjezdu za uskutečněním svých tajných snů. Autor se dále zabývá chorobopisem nakažlivé konzumní kultury, před kterou se Andy, Claire a Dag ukrývají v idylickém Palm Springs. Americké společnosti vládne televize a pravidelné nákupní orgie a tyto dva fenomény nebezpečně kolébají celou zemi do apatie a povrchnosti.

Hrdinové Generation X potřebují zažít něco opravdového a tím jsou například nadčasové úkazy, které nabízí příroda. Coupland naznačuje, že pro lidi unavené civilizací neexistuje autentičtější zkušenost, než zatmění slunce či kontakt s majestátně kroužící volavkou nad ztichlou a opuštěnou krajinou. Posledním tématem je pro Couplanda otázka minulosti a budoucnosti generace X. Protagonisté jeho knihy se snaží se minulosti zbavit, odpoutat se od ní, protože jedině tak mohou začít znovu, jinak a lépe. Budoucnost sice zůstává otazníkem, přesto příběh nakonec vyznívá nadějně.

Chuck Palahniuk se narodil roku 1962 ve státě Washington a ke svému příjmení přišel díky tomu, že sousedé si nepamatovali celá jména jeho ukrajinských prarodičů a nazývali je tudíž pouze Paula a Nick (z toho pramení i specifická výslovnost [pól-a-nyk]). Naštěstí pro nás je tento muž zajímavý nejen svým jménem. Bývalý novinář, mechanik i ošetřovatel dlouhodobě nemocných se pro kariéru spisovatele rozhodl v roce 1996, kdy byl publikován jeho první román Fight Club.

Příběh o frustrovaných mladících, kteří si po pracovní době v nezáživných zaměstnáních chodí vybíjet vztek a dodat sebevědomí do ilegálních klubů, kde se bojuje férově, ale až do posledních sil, vzbudil zasloužený rozruch u kritiky i příslušníků nezařaditelné generace X. Stejně jako u Couplandovy knihy, šlo zde o „hlasité vyslovení něčeho, co mnozí cítili, ale nedokázali to pojmenovat“ (Adamovič, 2). Rozčarování ze současné společnosti a nechuť podílet se na rozpínání povrchní masové kultury.

Fight Club vyšel česky v roce 2000 pod názvem Klub rváčů. Tento překlad je sice dostatečně lákavý a komerčně efektní, slovo „rváč“ však odkazuje spíše k chaotickým bitkám, rvačka jako taková v sobě totiž nese znaky náhodnosti a nesmyslné agresivity. Muži, sdružující se ve společenství zvaném fight club ovšem bojují se světem i mezi sebou za velmi přísných a jasně vymezených podmínek. Vzhledem k povaze příběhu zdála by se tedy vhodnější interpretací názvu ne sice tak doslovná, ale autorovým záměrům jistě bližší Pravidla zápasu.

Úspěch Fight clubu byl dále následován zdařilou satirou na kult televizních celebrit Survivor (1999), novelou o citovém vyděrači Choke (2001) či zatím posledním Palahniukovým příspěvkem s názvem Diary (2003), který se obrací směrem k temnějším stránkám lidské existence.

Ve spisovatelově prvním románu se dva hlavní hrdinové (Tyler Durden a bezejmenný vypravěč) nejdříve rozhodnou změnit sama sebe a následně uskutečňují velkolepý plán na přeměnu celé společnosti. K hlavním tématům patří obžaloba konzumní Ameriky, kde spokojenost obyvatel je mnohdy přímo úměrná pouze množství věcí, které jsou schopni si pořídit, opatřit, vystavět a vystavit. Z toho pramení devalvace pravých hodnot a prázdnota, kterou během svých bezesných nocí pociťuje vypravěč příběhu.

Další ožehavou otázkou je absence otců v mnoha amerických (a z jejich pohledu pravděpodobně i v zámořských) rodinách. Chlapcům patřícím ke generaci X chybí vzor, který by mohli následovat a který dříve býval zosobňován právě postavou otce. Synové jsou tudíž bezradní, nejistí a jen přispívají k všeobecné „krizi amerických mužů,“ kterou popisuje Palahniuk i americká socioložka Susan Faludi ve svých knihách (její studie byly jednou z autorových hlavních inspirací pro Fight Club).

Třetím okruhem je tudíž opět hledání protikladu k chaosu a umělosti současného světa a tou je tentokrát zážitek opravdovosti během nočních pěstních zápasů a pocit sounáležitosti během schůzek nevyléčitelně nemocných pacientů, kam se vypravěč pod různými záminkami i jmény

pravidelně infiltrovává a kde mu konečně někdo naslouchá, i když za velmi smutných okolností.

V závěrečné části práce dochází ke konfrontaci obou novel. Nejprve jde o srovnání z hlediska geografického. Oba příběhy jsou umístěny do Ameriky devadesátých let minulého století, ale zatímco Fight Club se odehrává výhradně v městském prostředí, protagonisté Generation X si ke svým meditacím vybírají odloučené prostředí komunity v Palm Springs. Další komparace se týká narativních technik, které autoři uplatňují neotřelým způsobem, avšak s maximální efektivitou. Ekonomické vyjadřování Palahniuka je ve výsledku téměř stejně působivé jako Couplandovy propracované fráze a detailní popisy situací i osob. Oba navíc dovedně využívají grafických možností (kurzíva, velká písmena) k dynamizaci textu.

Sumarizující srovnání stěžejních témat poté dokazuje shodné přístupy k problematice konzumní společnosti a nutnosti hledání východiska dříve, než bude příliš pozdě. Dále se projevuje podobný pohled na nestabilnost klasických hodnot, ať už se jedná o otázku rodiny nebo partnerských vztahů. I když Fight Club se svým radikálnějším a násilnějším pojetím značně liší od převážně nekonfliktně pojatého děje Generation X, oba spisovatelé svými otevřenými konci jasně naznačují, že jejich záměrem nebylo nabídnout jakousi spásnou alternativu či definovat jedinou správnou životní filozofii, ale pouze upozornit na stávající situaci, vyprovokovat diskuzi a interpretovat svět takový, jaký doopravdy je. Douglas Coupland i Chuck Palahniuk pomáhají svým čtenářům procitnout z letargie a zamyslet se, což je dle Chucka Palahniuka pro členy fight clubů a celé Generace X mnohem důležitější a užitečnější než jen stát v ústraní, „držet se za ruce a být spokojeni s tím, co se kolem nás děje“ (Adamovič, 5).

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8. Appendix:

Douglas Coupland's Generation X coinages

101-ism: (page 97)

The tendency to pick apart, often in minute detail, all aspects of life using half-understood pop psychology as a tool.

2 + 2 = 5-ism: (page 161)

Caving in to a target marketing strategy aimed at oneself after holding out for a long period of time. *"Oh, all right, I'll buy your stupid cola. Now just leave me alone."*

Air Family: (page 127)

Describes the false sense of community experienced among coworkers in an office environment.

Anti-Sabbatical: (page 40)

A job take with the sole intention of staying only for a limited period of time (often one year). The intention is usually to raise enough funds to partake in another, more personally meaningful activity such as watercolor sketching in Crete o r designing computer knit sweaters in Hong Kong. Employers are rarely informed of intention.

Anti-Victim Device (AVD): (page 131)

A small fashion accessory worn on an otherwise conservative outfit which announces to the world that one still has a spark of individuality burning inside: *1940s retro ties and earrings (on men), feminist buttons, noserings (women), and th e now almost completely extinct teeny weeny "rattail" haircut (both sexes).*

Architectural Indigestion: (page 85)

The almost obsessive need to live in a 'cool' architectural environment. Frequent related objects of fetish include framed black-and-white art photography (Diane Arbus is a favorite); simplistic pine furniture; matte black high-tech items such as TVs, stereos, and telephones; low-wattage ambient lighting; a lamp, chair, or table that alludes to the 1950s; cut flowers with complex name.

Armanism: (page 92)

After Giorgio Armani: an obsession with mimicking the seamless and (more importantly) *controlled* ethos of Italian culture. Like *Japanese Minimalism*, *Armanism* reflects a profound inner need for control.

Bambification: (page 54)

The mental conversion of flesh and blood living creatures into cartoon creatures possessing bourgeois Judeo-Christian attitudes and morals.

Black Dens: (page 155)

Where *Black Holes* live; often unheated warehouses with Day-Glo spray paint, mutilated mannequins, Elvis references, dozens of overflowing ashtrays, broken mirror sculptures, and Velvet Underground music playing in background.

Black Holes: (page 155)

An X generation subgroup best known for their possession of almost entirely black wardrobes.

Bleeding Ponytail: (page 24)

An elderly sold-out baby boomer who for hippie or pre-sellout days.

Boomer Envy: (page 26)

Envy of material wealth and long-range material security accrued by older members of the baby boom generation by virtue of fortunate births.

Bradyism: (page 154)

A multisibling sensibility derived from having grown up in large families. A rarity n those born after approximately 1965, symptoms of *Bradyism* include a facility for mind games, emotional withdrawal in situations of overcrowding, and a deeply felt need for well-defined personal space.

Brazilification: (page 13)

The widening gulf between the rich and the poor and the accompanying disappearance of the middle classes.

Bread and Circuits: (page 90)

The electronic era tendency to view party politics as corny -- no longer relevant or meaningful or useful to modern societal issues, and in may cases dangerous.

Café Minimalism: (page 122)

To espouse a philosophy of minimalism without actually putting into practice any of its tenets.

Celebrity Schadenfreude: (page 78)

Lurid thrills derived from talking about celebrity deaths.

Chryptotechnophobia: (page 172)

The secret belief that technology is more of a menace than a boon.

Clique Maintenance: (page 26)

The need of one generation to see the generation following it as deficient so as to bolster its own collective ego: *"Kids today do nothing. They're so apathetic. We used to go out and protest. All they do is shop and complain."*

Consensus Terrorism: (page 26)

The process that decides in-office attitudes and behavior.

Conspicuous Minimalism: (page 122)

A life-style tactic similar to *Status Substitution*. The nonownership of goods flaunted as a token of moral and intellectual superiority.

Conversational slumming: (page 130)

The self conscious enjoyment of a given conversation precisely for its lack of intellectual rigor. A major spin-off activity of *Recreational Slumming*.

Cryptotechnophobia: (page 200)

The secret belief that technology is more of a menace than a boon.

Cult of Aloneness: (page 77)

The need for autonomy at all costs, usually at the expense of long-term relationships. Often brought about by overly high expectations of others.

Decade Blending: (page 17)

In clothing: the indiscriminate combination of two or more items from various decades to create a personal mood: *Sheila = Mary Quant earrings (1960s) + cork wedgie platform shoes (1970s) + black leather jacket (1950s and 1980s).*

Derision Preemption: (page 173)

A life-style tactic; the refusal to go out on any sort of emotional limb so as to avoid mockery from peers. *Derision Preemption* is the main goal of *Knee-Jerk Irony*.

Diseases for Kisses (Hyperkarma): (page 54)

A deeply rooted belief that punishment will somehow always be far greater than the crime: ozone holes for littering.

Divorce Assumption: (page 39)

A form of *Safety Net-ism*, the belief that if marriage doesn't work out, then there is no problem because partners can simply seek a divorce.

Dorian Graying: (page 190)

The unwillingness to gracefully allow one's body to show the signs of aging.

Down-Nesting: (page 167)

The tendency of parent to move to smaller, guest-room-free houses after their children have moved away so as to avoid children aged 20 to 30 who have boomeranged home.

Dumpster Clocking: (page 188)

The tendency when looking at objects to guesstimate the amount of time they will take to eventually decompose: *"Ski boots are the worst. Solid plastic. They'll be around till the sun goes supernova."*

Earth Tones: (page 32)

A youthful subgroup interested in vegetarianism, tie-dyed outfits, mild recreational drugs, and good stereo equipment. Earnest, frequently lacking in humor.

Emallgration: (page 200)

Migration toward lower-tech, lower-information environments containing lessened emphasis on consumerism.

Emotional Ketchup Burst: (page 24)

The Bottling up opinions and emotions inside oneself so that they explosively burst forth all at once, shocking and confusing employers and friends -- most of whom thought things were fine.

The Emperor's New Mall: (page 80)

The popular notion that shopping malls exist on the insides only and have no exterior. The suspension of visual belief engendered by this notion allows shoppers to pretend that the large, cement blocks thrust into their environment do not, in fact, exist.

Ethnomagnetism: (page 32)

The tendency of young people to live in emotionally demonstrative, more unrestrained ethnic neighborhoods: *"You wouldn't understand it there, mother -- they* hug *where I live now."*

Expatriate Solipsism: (page 200)

When arriving in a foreign travel destination one had hoped was undiscovered, only to find many people just like oneself; the peeved refusal to talk to said people because they had ruined one's elitist travel fantasy.

Fame-Induced Apathy: (page 174)

The attitude that no activity is worth pursuing unless one can become very famous pursuing it. *Fame-Induced Apathy* mimics laziness, but its roots are much deeper.

Green Division: (page 174)

To know the difference between envy and jealousy.

Historical Overdosing: (page 9)

To live in a period of time when too much seems to happen. Major symptoms include addiction to newspapers, magazines and TV news broadcasts.

Historical Slumming: (page 13)

The act of visiting locations such as diners, smokestack industrial sites, rural villages -- locations where time has been frozen many years back -- so as to experience relief when one returns back to "the present."

Historical Underdosing: (page 9)

To live in a period of time when nothing seems to happen. Major symptoms include addiction to newspapers, magazines and TV news broadcasts.

Homeowner Envy: (page 167)

Feelings of jealousy generated by the young and the disenfranchised when faced with gruesome housing statistics.

Jack-and-Jill Party: (page 165)

A *Squire* tradition; baby showers to which both men and women friends are invited as opposed to only women. Doubled purchasing power of bisexual attendance brings gift values up to Eisenhower-era standards.

Japanese Minimalism: (page 85)

The most frequently offered interior design aesthetic used by rootless career-hopping young people.

Knee-Jerk Irony: (page 174)

The tendency to make flippant ironic comments as a reflexive matter of course in everyday conversation.

Legislated Nostalgia: (page 47)

To force a body of people to have memories that do not actually possess: *"How can I be a part of the 1960s generation when I don't even remember any of it?"*

Lessness: (page 60)

A philosophy whereby one reconciles oneself with diminishing expectations of material wealth: *"I've given up wanting to make a killing or be a bigshot. I just want to find happiness and maybe open up a little roadside cafe in Idaho."*

McJob: (page 6)

A low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job in the service sector. Frequently considered a satisfying career choice by people who have never held one.

Me-ism: (page 145)

A search by an individual, in the absence of training or traditional religious tenets, to formulate a personally tailored religion by himself. Most frequently a mishmash of reincarnation, personal dialogue with a nebulously defined god figure, naturalism, and karmic eye-for-eye attitudes.

Mental Ground Zero: (page 63)

The location where one visualizes oneself during the dropping of the atomic bomb; frequently, a shopping mall.

Metaphasia: (page 190)

An inability to perceive metaphor.

Mid-Twenties Breakdown: (page 33)

A period of mental collapse occurring in one's twenties, often caused by an inability to function outside of school or structured environments coupled with a realization of one's aloneness in the world. Often marks the induction into the ritual of pharmaceutical usage.

Musical Hairsplitting: (page 97)

The act of classifying music and musicians into pathologically picayune categories: *"The Vienna Franks are a good example of urban white acid folk revivalism crossed with ska."*

Native Aping: (page 200)

Pretending to be a native when visiting a foreign destination.

Now Denial: (page 47)

To tell oneself that the only time worth living in is the past and that the only time that may ever be interesting again is the future.

Nutritional Slumming: (page 138)

Food whose enjoyment stems not from flavor but from a complex mixture of class connotations, nostalgia signals, and packaging semiotics: *"Katie and I bought this tub of Multi-Whip instead of real whip cream because thought petroleum d istillate whip topping seemed like the sort of food that air force wives stationed in Pensacola back in the early sixties would feed their husband to celebrate a career promotion."*

Obscurism: (page 192)

The practice of peppering daily life with obscure references (forgotten films, dead TV stars, unpopular book, defunct countries, etc.) as a subliminal means of showcasing one's education and one's wish to disassociate from the world of mass culture.

Occupational Slumming: (page 130)

Taking a job beneath one's skills or education level as a means of retreat from adult responsibilities and/or avoiding possible failure in one's true occupation.

O'Propriation: (page 123)

The inclusion of advertising, packaging, and entertainment jargon from earlier eras in everyday speech for ironic and/or comic effect: *"Kathleen's Favorite dead Celebrity party was tons o' fun"* or *"Dave really think s of himself as a zany, nutty, wacky, and madcap guy, doesn't he?"*

Option Paralysis: (page 161)

The tendency, when given unlimited choices, to make none.

Overboarding: (page 32)

Overcompensating for fears about the future by plunging headlong into a job or life-style seemingly unrelated to one's previous interests; i.e., Amway sales, aerobics, the Republican Party, a career in law, cults, McJobs....

Ozmosis: (page 30)

The inability of one's job to live up to one's self-image.

Paper Rabies: (page 145)

Hypersensitivity to littering.

Personal Tabu: (page 83)

A small rule for living, bordering on superstition, that allows one to cope with everyday life in the absence of cultural or religious dictums.

Personality Tithe: (page 165)

A price paid for becoming a couple; previously amusing human beings become boring: *"Thanks for inviting us, but Noreen and I are going to look at flatware catalogs tonight. Afterward we're going to watch the travel channel."*

Platonic Shadow: (page 69)

A nonsexual friendship with a member of the opposite sex.

Poor Buoyancy: (page 92)

The realization that one was a better person when one had less money.

Poorochondria: (page 83)

Hypochondria derived from not having medical insurance.

Poverty Jet Set: (page 7)

A group of people given to chronic traveling at the expense of long-term job stability or a permanent residence. Tend to have doomed and extremely expensive phone call relationships with people names Serge or Ilyana. Tend to discuss frequent-flyer programs at parties.

Poverty Lurks: (158)

Financial paranoia instilled in offspring by depression-era parents.

Power Mist: (page 30)

The tendency of hierarchies in office environments to be diffuse and preclude crisp articulation.

Pull-the-Plug, Slice the Pie: (page 158)

A fantasy in which an offspring mentally tallies up the net worth of his parents.

QFD: (page 139)

Quelle fucking drag. *"Jamie got stuck in the Rome airport for thirty-six hours and it was, like, QFD."*

QFM: (page 139)

Quelle fashion mistake. *"It was really QFM. I mean, painter pants? That's 1979 beyond belief."*

Rebellion Postponement: (page 121)

The tendency in one's youth to avoid traditionally youthful activities and artistic experiences in order to obtain serious career goals. Sometimes results in the mourning for lost youth at about age thirty, followed by silly haircuts and joke-inducing wardrobes.

Recreational Slumming: (page 130)

The practice of participating in recreational activities of a class one perceives as lower than one's own: *"Karen! Donald! Let's go bowling tonight! An don't worry about shoes... apparently you can rent them."*

Recurving: (page 29)

Leaving one job to take another that pays less but places one back on the learning curve.

Safety Net-ism: (page 39)

The belief that there will always be a financial and emotional safety net to buffer life's hurts. Usually parents.

Sick Building Migration: (page 29)

The tendency of younger workers to leave or avoid jobs in unhealthy office environments or workplaces affected by Sick Building Syndrome.

Spectacularism: (page 50)

A fascination with extreme situations.

Squires: (page 156)

The most common *X* generation subgroup and the only subgroup given to breeding. *Squires* exist almost exclusively in couples and are recognizable by their frantic attempts to recreate a semblance of Eisenhower-era plenitude and their daily lives in the face of exorbitant housing prices and two-job life-styles. *Squires* tend to be continually exhausted from voraciously acquisitive pursuit of furniture and knickknacks.

Squirming: (page 129)

Discomfort inflicted upon young people by old people who see no irony in their gestures. *Karen died a thousand deaths as her father made a big show of tasting a recently manufactured bottle of wine before allowing it to be poured as the family sat in Steak Hut.*

Status Substitution: (page 60)

Using an object with intellectual or fashionable cachet to substitute for an object that is merely pricey: *"Brian, you left your copy of Camus in your brother's BMW."*

Strangelove Reproduction: (page 156)

Having children to make up for the fact that one no longer believes in the future.

Successophobia: (page 35)

The fear that if one is successful, then one's personal needs will be forgotten and one will no longer have one's childish needs catered to.

Survivulousness: (page 69)

The tendency to visualize oneself enjoying being the last person on earth. *"I'd take a helicopter up and throw microwave ovens down on the Taco Bell."*

Tele-Parablizing: (page 138)

Morals used in everyday life that derive from TV sitcom plots: *"That's just like the episode where Jan lost her glasses."*

The Tens: (page 189)

The first decade of a new century.

Terminal Wanderlust: (page 199)

A condition common to people of transient middle-class upbringings. Unable to feel rooted in any one environment, the move continually in hopes of finding an idealized sense of community in the next location.

Ultra Short Term Nostalgia: (page 109)

Homesickness for the extremely recent past: *"God, things seemed so much better in the world last week."*

Underdogging: (page 158)

The tendency to almost invariably side with the underdog in a given situation. The consumer expression of the this trait is the purchasing of less successful, "sad," or failing products: *"I know these Vienna franks are heart failure in a stick, but they were so sad looking up against all the other yuppie food items that I just had to buy them."*

Vaccinated Time Travel: (page 13)

To fantasize about traveling backward in time, but only with proper vaccinations.

Veal-Fattening Pen: (page 24)

Small, cramped office workstations built of fabric-covered disassemblable wall partitions and inhabited by junior staff members. Named for the pre-slaughter cubicles used by the cattle industry.

Virgin Runway: (page 200)

A travel destination chosen in the hopes that no one else has ever chosen it.

Voter's Block: (page 90)

The attempt, however futile, to register dissent with the current political system by simply not voting.

Yuppie Wannabe's: (page 91)

An *X* generation subgroup that believes the myth of a yuppie life-style being both satisfying and viable. Tend to be high in debt, involved in some form of substance abuse, and show a willingness to talk about Armageddon after three drinks.

Note.

The alphabetical list of coined terms from Douglas Coupland's Generation X was used with a kind permission of Mr. Jonny Forest of the Coupland File internet site.[4]

The individual entries were revised, completed and repaginated to correspond with the edition of Generation X used in the research for this work.