

SECOND NATURE: AMERICAN FICTION IN THE AGE OF
CAPITALIST REALISM

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Abstract

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During the 1990s the global triumph of capitalism has made it, paradoxically, all the more difficult *to see*. Not only is capitalism increasingly derealized (e.g. cyber-capital), its very ubiquity renders it unremarkable, to the point that it appears a neutral part of objective reality. This dissertation examines how American writers have responded to the ‘spectrality’ that results from the mediation of everyday experience through the market. I discuss formal strategies in the work of Bret Ellis, Chuck Palahniuk, Don DeLillo, William Gibson and others to represent the unrepresentable: what Slavoj Žižek calls the impersonal and anonymous function of the global market mechanism.

Chapter one provides a formalist reading of Ellis’s *American Psycho*, a novel whose claustrophobic narrative represents the world of late capitalism at the level of its concept (“This is not an exit”). Lacking any sense of a horizon, Patrick Bateman experiences the world as radically closed. Because he is incapable of recognizing an elsewhere, he cannot imagine an otherwise; demonstrating no awareness of antagonism, Patrick acts it out in increasingly brutal and frenetic outbursts of violence. Where *American Psycho* presents Patrick’s sadistic violence as a symptom, my second chapter suggests that *Fight Club*’s consensual beatings treat violence as a fetish. Palahniuk’s novel aims to domesticate antagonism by staging it as a piece of masochist theatre. Its limits, however, are painfully apparent. *Fight Club*’s strategy of fetishistic disavowal has pathological effects, namely, the narrator’s split personality. Chapter three discusses DeLillo’s critique of cyber-capital: a vision of the market as a perpetual motion machine, one capable of circulating solely on its own momentum without reference to anything beyond itself. Inevitably, though, antagonism reasserts itself in the form of a collateral crisis—the subject of *Cosmopolis*, which takes place during the stock market meltdown of April 2000 and offers its protagonist as the proximate cause. In the conclusion, I return to the question of ‘capitalist’ realism by exploring the depiction of post-Soviet Russia in recent fiction by Gibson and Womack. I argue that the spectacle of ‘actually existing capitalism’ renders cyberpunk speculation redundant; the dystopian future once predicted has not only arrived, it is already beginning to recede into our recent past.

Sommaire

DEUXIÈME NATURE : LA FICTION AMÉRICAINE À L'ÉPOQUE DU RÉALISME CAPITALISTE

Au cours des années 1990, le triomphe mondial du capitalisme a paradoxalement rendu les choses plus difficiles à *voir*. Le capitalisme est non seulement de plus en plus déréalisé (p. ex. : cybercapital), son ubiquité même le rend imperceptible, à un point tel qu'il semble être un élément neutre de la réalité objective. La présente dissertation aborde comment les auteurs américains ont réagi à la « spectralité » qui fait en sorte que l'expérience quotidienne est de plus en plus médiatisée au sein du marché. J'examine les stratégies formelles des œuvres de Bret Ellis, Chuck Palahniuk, Don DeLillo, William Gibson et autres auteurs afin de représenter ce qui ne peut être représenté : ce que Slavoj Žižek appelle la fonction impersonnelle et anonyme des rouages du marché mondial.

Le premier chapitre se veut une interprétation formelle de l'œuvre *American Psycho* d'Ellis, un roman dont la narration claustrophobe représente le monde du capitalisme tardif au niveau de son concept (« This is not an exit »). Souffrant d'un manque de perspective, Patrick Bateman vit une expérience du monde très fermée. Puisqu'il est incapable de reconnaître *ailleurs*, il ne peut s'imaginer *autrement*; faisant preuve d'un manque de connaissance de l'antagonisme, Patrick présente des excès de brutalité frénétique de plus en plus violents. Bien qu'*American Psycho* présente la violence sadique de Patrick comme étant un symptôme, mon deuxième chapitre laisse entendre que les raclées consensuelles de *Fight Club* traitent la violence en tant que fétiche. Le roman de Palahniuk vise à domestiquer l'antagonisme en en faisant une pièce de théâtre masochiste. Toutefois, ses limites sont affreusement évidentes. La stratégie de *Fight Club* de manque de foi pathologique a une incidence, entre autres sur le dédoublement de personnalité du narrateur. Le troisième chapitre aborde la critique de DeLillo sur le cybercapital : une vision du marché en tant que machine en mouvement perpétuel, capable de circuler uniquement à son propre rythme sans référence à quoi que ce soit au-delà d'elle-même. Mais inévitablement, l'antagonisme se réaffirme sous forme de crise collatérale – le sujet de *Cosmopolis*, qui se déroule pendant la chute des marchés boursiers d'avril 2000 et qui propose son protagoniste en tant que cause immédiate. En conclusion, je reviens à la question du réalisme « capitaliste » en explorant la représentation de la Russie postsoviet dans la récente œuvre de fiction de Gibson et Womack. Je fais valoir que le spectacle du « capitalisme qui existe vraiment » écrase la spéculation cyberpunk; l'avenir *dystopienne* que l'on attendait n'a pas vu le jour, et commence à être relégué dans notre passé récent.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction	
1. Preamble: towards a theory of capitalist realism	
2. The realism of capital: finance and fictitious capital	
3. The problem of realism after postmodernism	
4. From possessive individualism to the individual possessed	1
 Chapter one	
Homecoming at Camden College: An American Psycho returns to his alma mater	77
 Chapter two	
Soap Opera, or the Gospel of Tyler	161
 Chapter three	
In the ruins of the futures: Don DeLillo's Critique of Cyber-capital	231
 Conclusion	
From the New Economy to the New Russia: Cyberpunk's Last Frontier	315
 Works Cited	365
 Appendix	
An Interview with Chuck Palahniuk	389

INTRODUCTION

Capitalism is the first socio-economic order which detotalizes meaning: it is not global at the level of meaning (there is no global ‘capitalist world view’, no ‘capitalist civilization’ proper—the fundamental lesson of globalization is precisely that capitalism can accommodate itself to all civilizations, from Christian to Hindu and Buddhist); its global dimension can only be formulated at the level of truth-without-meaning, as the ‘Real’ of the global market mechanism.

— Slavoj Žižek

Post-Modern finance constitutes the Formalism of the Real World.

— Charles Newman

Preamble: towards a theory of capitalist realism

This dissertation proceeds from a single overarching idea: during the 1990s the global triumph of capitalism has made it, paradoxically, all the more difficult *to see*. Not only is capitalism increasingly derealized (e.g. digitalized cyber-capital), its very ubiquity renders it unremarkable, to the point that it appears a neutral part of objective reality. Globalization transforms capitalism from an ideology into an environment, a state of second nature where the ‘invisible hand’ is experienced as destiny itself. This provokes a representational crisis: how does one subjectivize the anonymous background operations of the economy? Can its abstract and impersonal logic be made available to experience? Can the frame be made *visible*? My dissertation reads American fiction produced during and about this neoliberal moment as examples of what I call capitalist realism. In contrast to debates over the status of realism after postmodernism, capitalist realism proceeds from the conviction that the task of realism today is not to represent reality, but the Real.¹

¹ While what follows trades mostly in a Lacanian understanding of the Real, I should acknowledge the tradition of critical realism associated with Roy Bhaskar, which makes a similar distinction between the Real and empirical reality; one “designed to legitimate the postulation of entities which are observable only via their effects” (Outhwaite 87).

The Real, suggests Jacques Lacan, is impossible. In Dylan Evans's gloss on the term, its impossibility is due to the fact it can neither be represented, integrated, nor attained within language, which is to say, the Symbolic order. The Real demarcates both the outer and inner limits of the knowable world. If the Real functions as something like an ontological constant in Lacan's theory, later critics like Teresa Brennan, Slavoj Žižek, and Todd McGowan stress that our experience of the Real—always a traumatic encounter—is both historically determined and culturally specific. In still-modernizing societies, the paradigmatic experience of the Real is found in the sense of an outer limit to the symbolic order: Nature. The Real designates the material substrate of existence, the brute physicality of bodies always already prior to their representation in language (Evans 160). However, in a postmodern society, which—as Fredric Jameson famously comments—is “what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good” (*Postmodernism* ix)—this outer limit no longer functions as our primary constraint. It never goes away entirely, of course. However postmodern we may be(come) we are still yoked to our bodies—bodies that are admittedly increasingly the subject of “modernizing” interventions. Instead, the Real is increasingly experienced as the inner limit, the constitutive antagonism cutting across the symbolic order, ensuring the impossibility of closure: “a surplus, a hard kernel, which resists any process of modeling, simulation or metaphoricization” (Žižek *Tarrying* 44). It designates the point where symbolization as a logical structure or system of meaning fails. In this sense, it functions very much like the navel in Freud's theory of dreams, “the spot where it reaches down into the unknown” (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 671). What remains unknown in

dreams is less a matter of specific content than it is a formal feature. The navel here designates the paradox of self-reference, the principle that the dream (or more specifically, the dream interpretation—and by extension, any type of systematizing thought) cannot be both consistent *and* complete; that a system cannot ground itself.²

Capital, declares Žižek, is the Real of our age; “ ‘reality’ is the social reality of the actual people involved in interaction, and in the productive process; while the Real is the inexorable ‘abstract’ spectral logic of Capital which determines what goes on in social reality” (*Fragile* 15). In other words, the Real designates the constitutive antagonism that disorders our experience of reality *from within*, a stubborn kernel or indivisible remainder; the internal limit that renders any representation of reality—realism—both inconsistent and incomplete. Žižek’s accomplishment is to explain how this antagonism serves as capitalism’s inner condition of possibility; it directly posits this excess as its driving force (*Parallax* 318).³ Capitalism is simultaneously its own obstacle and the constant effort to overcome it; the incessant expansion that results generates its characteristic feature: surplus value. The problem today, though, is that having surpassed its ‘outside’, capitalist globalization has effectively rendered the very notion of a limit unthinkable. Consequently, this disavowal of Real antagonism has the effect of naturalizing antagonism in social reality, leading to outbreaks of irrational aggression (the spontaneous eruption of various ‘rages’) and what Étienne Balibar calls “an expanding

² While I’ve used a spatial metaphor to evoke the paradoxical quality of the Real—inside and outside—Dennis Foster points out that it also “has the ambiguous quality of being both prior to and a consequence of symbolic forms” (12). Put simply, the Real designates the coincidence of opposites.

³ In noting that “the limit of capital is capital itself,” Žižek draws attention to the shared identity of the Lacanian Real with Marx’s claim that “the real barrier of capitalist production is capital itself” (*Sublime* 51).

economy of global violence” (xi). I offer capitalist realism in the spirit of disenchantment; as a mode of reading it attempts to de-naturalize such expressions of antagonism in social reality (i.e. violence) by making *explicit* the underlying Real antagonism, what Žižek calls “the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism, which is much more uncanny than direct pre-capitalist socio-ideological violence: this violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their ‘evil’ intentions; it is purely ‘objective,’ systemic, anonymous” (*Fragile* 15).

My dissertation focuses on various iterations of this deadlock in the work of Bret Easton Ellis, Chuck Palahniuk, Don DeLillo, Jack Womack and William Gibson. Chapter one discusses Ellis’s *American Psycho*, a novel whose claustrophobic narrative represents the world of late capitalism at the level of its concept: “The market is an absolute; it has no external limits,” notes Balibar. “The Market is the World. When it excludes you, you cannot leave it, search for another America, settle there and start again” (142). What is remarkable about *American Psycho* is the extent to which the author refuses any position of transcendence. Lacking any sense of a horizon, Patrick Bateman—the titular character—experiences the world as radically closed (“This is not an exit”). Because he is incapable of recognizing an elsewhere, he cannot imagine an otherwise; demonstrating literally no awareness of antagonism, Patrick is compelled to act it out in increasingly frantic outbursts of violence. This chapter pays considerable attention to the techniques Ellis uses to evoke Patrick’s paradoxical perspective, one that is unable to engage in any sort of reasoning beyond that of a brute (and brutal) positivism. This poses a challenge not only to traditional modes of characterization, but also to plotting. Following Marco

Abel, I argue that *American Psycho* generates narrative momentum through the heightening of affect rather than the unfolding of causal relations. Having established Ellis's substantial achievement in creating a meaningless and, recalling Žižek, *detotalized* world, this chapter proceeds to demonstrate how the author nonetheless manages to mount a coherent critique of Patrick's senseless sensibility from *within* the narrative without expressly contradicting it.

Chapter two turns to *Fight Club*, Chuck Palahniuk's debut novel which was turned into a Hollywood blockbuster by director David Fincher. Where *American Psycho* presents Patrick's sadistic cruelty as a symptom of the "worldless" character of late capitalism⁴, my second chapter suggests that *Fight Club* self-consciously invokes the spectacle of masochistic violence as a fetish *in order to endure it*. The difference between symptomatic and fetishistic modes of ideology, argues Žižek, can be found in the fact that "a symptom is the exception which disturbs the surface of false appearance, the point at which the repressed truth erupts, while a fetish is the embodiment of the lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth" ("The Prospects of Radical Politics Today" 253). Palahniuk's novel aims to domesticate antagonism by staging it as a piece of masochist theatre. Its limits, however, are painfully apparent. *Fight Club's* strategy of fetishistic disavowal (which both evokes and evades the deadlock) has pathological effects, namely, the narrator's split personality.

⁴ Žižek describes worldlessness as characteristic of "the exceptional ontological status of capitalism, whose dynamics undermines every stable frame of representation: what is usually a task to be performed by critico-political activity [...] is already performed by capitalism itself" (*Parallax* 318). There are obvious parallels here with the idea of "deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari).

In chapter three, I explore DeLillo's critique of cyber-capital in *Underworld*, *Cosmopolis* and "In the ruins of the future", his essay on 9/11 published in *Harper's*. New Economy boosters like George Gilder argued that the potent convergence of information technology and financial speculation enabled cyber-capital to transcend the material constraints of fixed capital. This unerring faith in the power of technoculture to overcome its own contradictions culminated in a vision of the market as a perpetual motion machine, one capable of circulating solely on its own momentum without reference to anything beyond itself. Inevitably, though, the deadlock reasserts itself in the form of a collateral crisis—the subject of *Cosmopolis*, which takes place during the stock market meltdown of April 2000 and offers its protagonist, financier Eric Packer, as the proximate cause.

In my fourth and concluding chapter, I discuss representations of post-Soviet Russia in recent novels by William Gibson and Jack Womack. Better known for their cyberpunk fiction, both Gibson and Womack have increasingly turned to more straightforwardly 'realist' narratives, motivated, I argue, by the spectacle of 'actually existing capitalism' in the New Russia. 'Shock therapy' unleashed a neoliberal utopia, one that reshaped Russia according to the dictates of free trade, privatization and foreign direct investment. For the majority of citizens of the formerly Second World, Third World poverty was the result—excepting, of course, the emergent capitalist class whom, quite literally, made out like bandits. Post-Soviet reality, the authors discovered, renders cyberpunk speculation superfluous; the dystopian future once predicted has not only arrived, it is already beginning to recede into our recent past.

Having provisionally outlined some of the main contours of capitalist realism and briefly introduced each chapter, my aim in what follows is threefold. First, I offer some preliminary comments on the information standard and the logic of capitalist realism.⁵ I am, of course, playing on the title of Walter Benn Michaels's influential *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*. Michaels's study examines the homologies between economic experience and literary expression in turn-of-the-century American fiction. My study, in contrast, is concerned with the "New Gilded Age" rather than the old one. I argue that during the neoliberal era, rampant financialization not only erodes economic and literary values ("climax inflation," Charles Newman calls it), but renders them progressively indistinguishable from one another. Second, I turn to the problem of realism after literary postmodernism. Contemporary realism offers entirely contradictory responses to the representational instability characteristic of the neoliberal era ('volatility'); the coincidence of opposites attests to the presence of Real antagonism.⁶ Neo-realists seek *reauthorization* through an appeal to the authenticity of individual experience, often expressed in terms of corporeality (i.e. what 'matters'). But while the body (and identity thinking in general) offers a locus for experience, as David Harvey points out, it tells us little about a direction for action ("Body Politics" 118). Accordingly, neo-realism also designates a desire for narrative, for the stories that will enable us to span the sometimes-jagged discontinuities of contemporary life and provide a basis for action. "This new understanding of reality is very hard to pin down ideologically, but it is

⁵ "In 1971 we switched from a gold standard to an information standard" (Taylor 149).

⁶ Fredric Jameson provides an apt summation of the problem: "If individual experience is authentic, then it cannot be true; and that if a scientific or cognitive model of the same content is true, then it escapes individual experience" ("Cognitive Mapping" 349).

certainly not a view of reality that would confirm a liberal version,” notes Winfried Fluck, an early participant and particularly incisive commentator in the debates over neo-realism. “In this sense, I think, the return of realism is by no means what it appeared and promised to be: it is not a reauthorization of liberalism. Quite to the contrary, it is another blow to liberalism’s cultural authority” (83). This brings me to my third topic: the torsion exerted on the liberal self by finance. Specifically, I argue that financialization abstracts the formerly immediate and organic relationship between possession and ownership; as the two terms drift apart, the very basis of liberal subjectivity, what C.B. McPherson famously termed possessive individualism, begins to fray.

THE REALISM OF CAPITAL: FINANCE AND FICTITIOUS CAPITAL

Richard Godden suggests that our culture is one “where the dominant system of production is geared to the manufacture of an extended and often unacknowledged metaphor: ‘capitalist realism’ (9).⁷ My dissertation subjects this “unacknowledged metaphor” to a rigorous and sustained interrogation, a task made all the more urgent by the fact that it is being produced today on a hitherto unimaginable scale. Godden, for example, places capitalist realism in the context of emerging consumer capitalism at the end of the nineteenth century and later periods of expansion in the 1920s and 1950s (citing the work of writers like Henry James, Ernest Hemingway and Norman Mailer, respectively); in effect, he treats it as a synonym for commodity fetishism. Updating his argument, I argue that in the context of capitalist globalization during the 1990s, we are faced with the fetishization of the market mechanism, which is less a tangible object than an immaterial process (‘efficiency’) or what Antonio Negri describes as *spectrality*: “the ghostly reality which embraces and keeps us, not only in ideology but in the body, forms an ontology in which we’re enveloped” (13).

Capitalist realism is not simply a genre of the novel or a mode of reading. It designates the increasingly fictional quality of capital itself. One of the more striking developments over the last thirty years is the hegemony of finance; what Marx called ‘fictitious capital’. Finance has always served as the engine of Capital—by distributing liquidity, it enables productive investment. Following Marx, David Harvey suggests that the circulation of capital presumes this co-ordinating function, but that it was not

⁷ Godden actually borrows the term from a study of advertising (see Schudson).

formalized until the emergence of credit money—fictitious capital.⁸ As more and more capital is fixed, it begins to pose a barrier to the process of accumulation itself. Fictitious capital, titles unbacked by any firm—which is to say, *fixed*—collateral, is increasingly required to lubricate circulation and thus enable future accumulation. Consequently, “the prices of these titles may then fluctuate according to their own laws, ‘quite independently of the movement of the value of real capital’ ” (Harvey *Limits* 268). What is distinctive about finance under neoliberalism is that it is elevated from the enabling condition of capitalist enterprise to its very rationale. “Neoliberalization,” argues Harvey, “means the financialization of everything” (*Neoliberalism* 33). The absolute expansion of fictitious capital ushers in a crisis in the concept of value as its fluctuations are increasingly divorced from its productive base. Finance becomes a category of economic activity unto itself, apparently capable of generating short-term profits autonomously through speculation rather than productive investment. It is as if finance capital “can live on its own internal metabolism and circulate without any reference to an older type of content” (Jameson “Culture and Finance Capital” 161).

The contemporary financial era began on August 15, 1971 when the United States went off the gold standard, and shortly thereafter abandoned the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates altogether. The stability that had characterized the post-war financial order gave way to global turbulence because floating exchange rates injected a previously unimaginable degree of volatility into the financial markets.⁹ The economy,

⁸ For an influential treatment of fictitious capital in Marx’s theory, particularly the way in which it is “contained in the very concept of capital itself,” see David Harvey’s *Limits to Capital* (266-70).

⁹ Volatility that was greatly heightened by the oil crunch in 1973. See Brenner, Harvey, Gowan, Taylor.

according to Mark Taylor, became spectral, because “floating signifiers unmoored from any stable referent had neither secure nor predictable value” (128). What was so unsettling was that it was no longer clear what a dollar represented. Prior to 1971, the value of the dollar rested on the firm foundation of gold convertibility (\$35 per ounce). Once this relationship was suspended, however, the dollar—and the concert of currencies that were previously “fixed” to it—could no longer appeal to a transcendent guarantor (the gold reserves that are, by definition, “reserved” from circulation). Instead, its value was determined solely in relation to other currencies.¹⁰ In this sense, the end of the gold standard and resulting financial market volatility are symptoms of a widespread representational crisis, one that has collectively come to be known as postmodernism.¹¹

Instead of anchoring and stabilizing the textual system, as in classical realism, the representation of reality is now infected by the instabilities of the process of signification itself, so that reality, as represented in the new realism, is dominated by the unstable, decentered features that also characterizes the textual system. Or, to put it differently: the mimetic relation between the textual system and its referent has now become, if not inverted, at least one of mutual exchange, so that reality emerges as a space of proliferating signs in which all striving for order remains arbitrary. (Fluck 83)

In the humanities, the advent of postmodernism spurred a profusion of theorizing in the attempt to find a stable ground for value (and to make judgments, be they aesthetic, ethical, etc.) or barring that, codify how one should act in the absence of any grounding

¹⁰ “The structural dimension becomes autonomous” (Baudrillard *Symbolic* 6).

¹¹ “The breakdown of money as a secure means of representing value has itself created a crisis of representation in advanced capitalism” (Harvey *Condition* 298). The 1980s and 1990s were characterized by “faster growth in the financial sector than in the real economy and therefore to a shrinkage of the latter relative to the former. The result of these developments was an inverted pyramiding process in which the foundation of financial markets was virtually disappearing. At the same time, similar developments were unfolding in the arts, philosophy, and critical theory” (Taylor 253).

principle.¹² Much like their counterparts in the humanities, economists sought new ways to establish certainty or, in terms specific to their discourse, manage volatility and hedge risk. The unprecedented growth of the financial markets—both relative to the productive economy and in absolute terms¹³—runs parallel to developments in “much of contemporary theory or philosophy, which has involved a prodigious expansion in what we consider to be rational or meaningful behaviour” (Jameson *Postmodernism* 268). Both the abundance of theory and the explosion of new financial instruments like derivatives (see chapter three) are driven by the desire to stabilize value and ground representation; their failure to do so makes them shared symptoms of what Charles Newman calls the “age of inflation” (1985).

The Post-Modern is above all characterized by the inflation of discourse, manifesting itself in literature through the illusion that technique can remove itself from history by attacking a concept of objective reality which has already faded from the world, and in criticism by the development of secondary languages which presumably “demystify” reality, but actually tend to further obscure it. (10)

By tracing a homology between inflation in concepts and in currencies, Newman performs a prescient reading of the postmodern that suggests how, just like finance in the market, theory in the academy is “an infinitely expendable currency, the ultimate inflation hedge”; a form of meta-speculation on its own conditions of possibility (14). Newman insists that theory, a category including ‘experimental’ and academic (i.e. non-commercial) writing, is not simply an idealistic exercise or empty formalism; it is a

¹² In his landmark study *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale charts a paradigm shift from the modernist concern with epistemology to a postmodernist emphasis on ontology. Faced with a crisis in what one can know about the world, the response is to turn within. McHale’s thesis would seem to be borne out by the ethical turn in postmodern theory (evident in the work of, and on, Derrida and Levinas) and interest in the category of the Act (Badiou), both part of a broader realignment away from “knowing” toward “being.”

¹³ “Perhaps the most staggering statistic of all is \$17 trillion raised in the securities markets during the great boom of the 1990s, which is more than was generated in the prior 200 years” (Martin 178).

materialist pursuit spurred by pragmatic self-interest.¹⁴ Newman's point is not that theory is divorced from practice, but that theory is itself *a form of practice*—one that is largely unconscious of itself as such. “It is about time that the American writer ceased confusing his peripherality with freedom of expression, and began to find out where he fits into productive and social relations of the world which most affects him,” Newman declares (167). The only cure to runaway inflation in concepts as well as currencies, Newman proposes, is stricter accounting standards, a rigorous criticism that acknowledges all sources of profit and dispenses with the double standards of disavowal (‘cooked books’).

For all of the theorizing *about* the crisis in value, what went largely unrecognized was that this activity is a symptom—and perpetuation—of the crisis itself. “‘Theory’ is one name for a methodological crisis in the humanities, not its resolution,” note Caren Irr and Ian Buchanan in their introduction to a collection of essays on Fredric Jameson (2). The profusion of theory is a *particular* manifestation of an underlying inflationary tendency evident in society at large. Its emergence as a privileged discourse signals the moment when the market rationalizes the academy, driven by its expansionary logic to absorb previously autonomous spheres of existence (and reorganize said sphere according to the same logic). Beyond the ever-growing academic preserve of theory, Newman also notes that rampant inflation is also evident in the currency of fiction. “In the last thirty years, more novels have been published than in any comparable period of history, and yet, quality aside, no age has been less sure about what a novel is, or more skeptical of the value and function of ‘imaginative’ literature” (9).

¹⁴ Mark Osteen and Martha Woodmansee, for example, note that “the economics of academic publishing has forced literary critics to seek untrammelled pathways” (4).

Originally published in 1984 as a long essay in the journal *Salmagundi*, Newman's *The Post-Modern Aura* proved somewhat controversial. In fact, the journal hosted a debate about his argument the following year and the contributors took the author to task for his jeremiad. The detractors, a majority, politely acknowledged the theme of inflation, but focused mainly on Newman's presentation of the debate between experimental writing ("Formalism") and neo-realism, which figures prominently in the next section. In fact, Newman is one of the first critics to identify and discuss neo-realism, a literary development of which he took a decidedly dim view. Newman's strident critique of neo-realism is actually directed at dirty realism; he offers some disparaging comments about Raymond Carver: "The most obvious example of our ongoing humiliation, however, is the recent reaction against the experiment, a fashionable Neo-Realism, which through its wilfull underdeployment of resources," Newman charges, "comes to constitute the deflationary mode of Literary Revivalism. It is the classic conservative response to inflation—underutilization of capacity, reduction of inventory and verbal joblessness" (93). Carver, he complains, offers "an artless analgesic worse than the addiction" (94). Newman's bellicose rhetoric failed to win many converts to his cause. Respondents tended to emphasize his aggrieved manner and self-dramatizing mode of presentation: Ihab Hassan accused the author of lacking "emotional generosity" (170), Mark Schechner called him "overbearing" (38) while John O'Kane plaintively suggested that "Newman's rhetoric offers little hope" (172). In the main, however, critics seemed somewhat befuddled by what he actually had to say. *The Post Modern Aura* has largely disappeared as a living reference in critical debate even though

it has obvious parallels to Fredric Jameson's celebrated work on postmodernism. More recently, Jeremy Green appears to be aiming at much the same target in his stated intent "to present a *snapshot* of the literary field in advanced capitalism" (3, italics in original).

In treating literature as economics, Newman was treading a lightly traveled path, though hardly alone.¹⁵ In the same year *The Postmodern Aura* was published—1985—*The Rhetoric of Economics* appeared. Written by economist Deirdre McCloskey, it reads economics as literature. McCloskey offers a penetrating analysis of economics as a pathological discourse rather than as a matter of impersonal procedure and impartial technique.¹⁶ This turned out to be a highly influential intervention as it drew attention to how the figurative language of economics, particularly finance, increasingly encroaches upon our vernacular. More recently, "the new economic criticism" has emerged as a thriving interdisciplinary field, one that ranges from the notion of author-as-producer to gift theory to the semiotic parallels between monetary and linguistic systems and beyond (Woodmansee and Osteen). In a related vein, Amitava Kumar calls for the study of "World Bank Literature," less a defined area than a provocation intended to "invite inquiry into globalization, the economy, and the role of literary and cultural studies" (xix). Kumar even offers it as "a new name for postcolonial studies" (xx). His edited collection on the topic features several articles that critique the discourse of development through a close reading of documents from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. What

¹⁵ Walter Benn Michaels' *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* soon followed (1987). Addressing a crisis in the concept of value in both literary and monetary terms, Michaels offers a bravura reading of turn-of-century American fiction (Norris, Dreiser, etc.).

¹⁶ I realize that a broad swathe of structuralist criticism goes unmentioned here—primarily Lacan's critique of utilitarianism as well as the treatment of symbolic economies in the work of Jean Baudrillard and Jean-Joseph Goux. Their work is both beyond the scope of this dissertation and yet implicitly presumed by it; one of my main contentions is that today theoretical speculation and pragmatic calculation are near-indistinguishable.

this brief tour demonstrates is the widespread applicability of capitalist realism. It is not simply a literary genre or a mode of reading or even a comment on the way Capital appears *real to us*: self-evident, obvious and inevitable (though it is indeed all of these things). Capitalist realism is also sensitive to the increasingly discursive nature of Capital ('informatization'), which makes it appear merely *realistic*, a semblance of itself and yet no less efficient for all that.

THE PROBLEM OF REALISM AFTER POSTMODERNISM

The major struggle in American fiction today is over the question of realism.

— James Wood

Realism is an issue not only for literature: it is a major political, philosophical and practical issue and must be handled and explained as such—as a matter of general human interest.

— Bertolt Brecht

Perhaps the most pressing problem among literary critics today is one of terminology: in the wake of postmodernism, what should we call the literature of the present moment? There is no shortage of candidates, from late postmodernism (Green) to blank fiction (Annesley), but the overall trend points in one direction. Contemporary American fiction has rediscovered realism. Or rather, *realisms*. At last count, critics have identified dirty realism (Rebein), spectacle realism (Dewey), tragic realism (Franzen), crackpot realism (Bukiet), hysterical realism (Wood), neo-realism (Bradbury, Claviez, Newman, Versluys) and doubtlessly many more. Neo-realism itself should be regarded as the genus of this species and has generated an impressively varied and contradictory roster of proponents, apologists, and cranks. Some critics welcome it as an opportunity to once again practice literary *criticism* as opposed to *theory*, a return to “plain English” (Pinsker 51). Others see it as the rightful inheritor of a tradition of postmodern experimentation. Both Jeremy Green and Stathis Gourgouris argue for not just theoretically informed fiction, but literature *as* theory.¹⁷ Along the same lines, Phillip Wegner, a contributor to Thomas Claviez’s collection of neo-realist essays, reads theory

¹⁷ Green notes: “late postmodernist fiction resembles postmodern theory, for which the postmodern present appears utterly unlike the past—much more skeptical, suspicious, ironic—even though the cause of this transfiguration remain elusive for many theorists” (12).

as literature, offering a synoptic reading of Fredric Jameson's criticism as a "theoretical novel" ("Periodizing Jameson" 243).¹⁸ Still more critics patrol the boundary between these two positions. Robert Rebein, for example, stakes out the middle ground, suggesting that "realist writers have absorbed postmodernism's more lasting contributions and gone on to forge a new realism that is more or less traditional in its handling of character, reportorial in its depiction of milieu and time, but is at the same time self-conscious about language and the limits of mimesis" (20).¹⁹

What these varied realisms share is a conviction that fiction can and should communicate more than its own fictional status. At its most vulgar, the contest between literary postmodernism and what comes after is framed as one between the opacity of experimental writing and the transparency of realism. This opposition is a common-enough heuristic and seductive, too. As novelist and critic Malcolm Bradbury confesses, it is an appealingly simple contrast, "one in which I have often indulged myself, though never with any ease" (15). The problem, he acknowledges, is that under even the most rudimentary examination the opposition patently fails to hold up. Even the most experimental of fictions requires some purchase outside of itself in order to be intelligible. And while transparency is perhaps the main effect of the realist novel, it is hardly a goal in itself. "Everyone knows now that the conventions of nineteenth-century fiction were

¹⁸ I should note that Wegner's reading of Jameson is found in a different essay than his neo-realist reading of Don DeLillo's *Underworld* ("Periodizing the Cold War").

¹⁹ The inability to settle on what we mean by realism—to agree on some (canonical) limit that defines it—is indicative of what Slavoj Žižek calls declining symbolic efficiency. With the addition of its prefix, however, neo-realism allows us to act as if such a limit was in place and operative. Reflexively aware that there is no "innocent" representation of reality, neo-realism nonetheless disavows this traumatic knowledge as its founding gesture and condition of its proper function. Rather than specify some putative positive content that realist texts share in common, then, 'neo-' serves as an empty placeholder for a series of disagreements about the nature of literary realism. In fact, 'neo' has no inherent meaning aside from this synthetic or bracketing function; it signifies the very antagonism that makes realism impossible.

just that, conventions, and not a transparent window on reality,” notes Brian McHale (220). What Ian Watt calls the novel’s formal realism, the means by which it achieves its reality-effect, depends on the functioning of literary conventions that are conventional enough to *appear* transparent—to go without comment, unnoticed.²⁰ Formal realism, then, “allows for a more immediate imitation of individual experience set in its temporal and spatial environment than do other literary forms” (33). The problem, of course, is that the air of authenticity this generates can lead to the fetishization of transparency, emphasizing the perfect coincidence of the object and means of representation. Writing in 1957 on the very cusp of postmodernism, Watt suggests that the “rather widespread distaste for Realism and all its works which is current today” is due to “the tendency of some Realists and Naturalists to forget that the accurate transcription of actuality does not necessarily produce a work of any real truth or enduring literary value” (33). As we shall see in chapter one, *American Psycho* satirizes this phenomenological reduction by granting its protagonist the same abilities as his video camera to record reality (thus producing documentary ‘truth’) emphasizing that while this imbecilic gaze looks, it cannot *see*.

Watt’s venerable thesis reappeared in *Harper’s* magazine at the very height of the debate over the form and shape of the new realism, clad in a white linen suit. In “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel” Tom Wolfe calls for nothing less than the return of the Great American Novel by revitalizing the principles of formal realism. “The introduction of realism into literature in the eighteenth

²⁰ “Formal, because the term realism does not here refer to any special literary doctrine or purpose, but only to a set of narrative procedures which are so commonly found together in the novel, and so rarely in other literary genres, that they may be regarded as typical of the form itself.” (Watt 32-33)

century by Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett was like the introduction of electricity into engineering. It was not just another device,” argues Wolfe. “For writers to give up this power in the quest for a more up-to-date kind of fiction—it is as if an engineer were to set out to develop a more sophisticated kind of machine technology by first of all discarding the principle of electricity, on the grounds that it has been used ad nauseam for a hundred years” (50-51). By agitating for a return to the social novel, Wolfe takes aim squarely at two targets: the “Puppet Masters” playfully pulling metafictional strings and the “K-Mart realists,” practitioners of a downbeat realism reduced in terms of style (its minimalist aesthetic) and scope (focused on the particularities of class, race, and place). The problem with the former is their habitual violation of the rules of formal realism; the latter, their solipsistic focus on individual experience. In contrast, Wolfe exhorts writers to put away their “sublime literary game” and embrace the “big realistic novel with a broad social sweep,” one capable of capturing contemporary city life (48). Generously offering his own *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) as an example of the resuscitated social novel, Wolfe predicts that the future belongs to the novelist-as-reporter. His insistence on the reportorial basis of the new realism does raise some troubling questions, if only because reportage has traditionally offered the strongest claim to representational transparency of any genre. In this sense, he runs the risk of inspiring the same sort of misguided approach identified by Watt: a debased realism that privileges accuracy over truth (i.e. the ‘reality novel’). After all, as a modest witness—neutral, impartial, passively observing—the reporter ideally functions as recorder. To be fair, this concern is somewhat obviated given Wolfe’s own journalistic practice, one that employs fictional

devices, overtly subjectivizes the story by turning the reporter into an active participant, thus—in a neat reversal of the formula above—featuring the reporter-as-novelist.²¹ Drawing attention to its use and abuse of journalistic conventions, the New Journalism employed a self-reflexive approach that places it squarely within the metafictional impulse of literary postmodernism—an affiliation about which Wolfe remains curiously silent. In fact, Wolfe offers little in this essay on the *style* of reportorial realism. Instead, he champions it more as an ethic of engagement: an injunction to the prospective novelist to go out into the world in search of the story. Here the object of Wolfe’s ire is the old adage to “write what you know.” This emphasis on personal authenticity, he believes, has resulted in cramped prose of writers unable to transcend their individual experience (52). The turn toward reportage is not so much the rejection of the authenticity argument but a way of radically expanding its possibilities by encouraging the writer to *know more*.

A number of critics identify Wolfe’s intervention as a pivotal moment in the codification of the new realism (Bradbury, Leypoldt, Fluck, Versluys).²² His essay set a clear agenda—rehabilitating the social novel—and provided a diagnosis of postmodernism’s contradictory legacy: excessive experimentation and reduced realism. What’s more, Wolfe’s call for a revitalized social novel anticipated a flood, since that very

²¹ *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1967) remains a classic of the type of social reportage associated with the New Journalism. Other important figures include Joan Didion, Terry Southern, Hunter Thompson and even Norman Mailer (for *Armies of the Night*, a ‘nonfiction novel’ depicting the 1967 March on Washington). Wolfe both named and codified the phenomenon in a co-edited collection (with Edward Warren Johnson) *The New Journalism* (1973).

²² If at times grudgingly: “It is both stylish and conservative, and it claims to observe for the first time what had been observed already,” notes Bradbury, deflating Wolfe’s self-congratulatory tone (20). James Wood is similarly dismissive; his comments about Wolfe’s fiction apply equally to his criticism: “Wolfe does not realize that his gaudy storytelling is mannered or sensational. He thinks that it is realistic because life is gaudy; he is like a man with a very loud voice who thinks he speaks like everyone else” (“Tom Wolfe’s Shallowness” 212).

form proliferated during the 1990s and since in the work of Don DeLillo (*Underworld*), David Foster Wallace (*Infinite Jest*), Jeffrey Eugenides (*Middlesex*), Rick Moody (*Purple America*), Jonathan Franzen (*The Corrections*), Jonathan Lethem (*The Fortress of Solitude*), William Vollman (*The Royal Family*), Richard Powers (*Plowing the Dark*) and countless others. These authors have adopted Wolfe's ethic of engagement, writing encyclopedic narratives that enthusiastically comply with the injunction to know more (and more and more...).²³ Wolfe's essay was timely in more than a literary fashion. Appearing on the newsstands in November 1989, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast" found its readership just as the Berlin Wall fell. Within two short years, the Soviet Union had disintegrated and the U.S. had waged and won—with contemptuous ease—the first Gulf War at the head of a grand coalition. The New World Order, as it was styled by the first Bush administration, was falling into place. The resurgence of the social novel in the 1990s is a testament to the mood of national confidence as all the world became a stage, a screen onto which Americans projected their fantasies (and more recently, fears).

Wolfe's essay helpfully distinguishes between two phases—or more accurately—two divergent tendencies in the development of neorealism after postmodernism, which I broadly categorize as *the right to narrate* and, following Wegner, *the desire for narrative* ("Periodizing the Cold War" 52). On the one hand, the right to narrate refers to the emergence of new subjects of history and their struggles to have their stories told. The opening of the canon complicated once clear distinctions about *whose* experiences were worthy of representation. This leads to the absolute expansion of experience available to

²³ The broad canvas and vast scope of these novels has led many critics to identify them as successors to Thomas Pynchon.

realism, which in turn sparks a new crisis—not one of exclusion but its opposite. The difficulty today is not with realism *per se*, but with reality—specifically, its surfeit. The challenge for the aspiring practitioner of realism is not simply sorting through the prodigious expansion in realities to be represented, but the ethics of doing so. The clear premium the right to narrate places on self-expression introduces a complex series of questions about hegemony, subversion and appropriation. The desire for narrative, on the other hand, refers to “our inability to tell the stories that would enable us to reposition ourselves within and hence act in our new world” (Wegner “Periodizing Jameson” 262). This takes on a particular urgency in the 1990s as American novelists (and America itself) grappled with the new realities of globalization; a unipolar world underwritten by American hyperpower and the de facto dollar standard. In no small part, though, this tendency also emerges out of frustration (of these mostly white men) with the self-limiting (or self-limited) emphasis on identity. Rather than accept that the literary field consists of a series of localized interventions restricted to celebrating the particularity of class, gender, race and place (i.e. regionalism), the turn toward the social novel signals a determination among writers to, as Fredric Jameson puts it, “think the totality” once more.

“It’s possible that the American experience today has become so sprawling and diffracted that no single ‘social novel’ à la Dickens or Stendhal, can ever hope to mirror it; perhaps ten different novels from ten perspectives are required now,” muses Jonathan Franzen. “Unfortunately, there’s also evidence that young writers today feel imprisoned by their ethnic or gender identities—discouraged from speaking across boundaries by a

culture in which television has conditioned us to accept only the literal testimony of the Self” (“Why Bother?” 80). The quandary Franzen identifies in this 1996 essay perfectly expresses the vexed status of realism after postmodernism. He is sensitive to the complicated negotiations involved when one presumes to speak for another (which is to say, ‘the other’) and yet he chafes at the restraint, having early on dedicated himself to the social novel. What makes him a particularly fascinating figure is that even though he regularly decries the “the tyranny of the literal” he so often finds himself in thrall to it (“Why Bother?” 66). His essays read as a series of compulsive self-betraysals as he habitually confuses aesthetic criteria with personal qualities—for example, treating ‘difficulty’ (i.e. technical sophistication) as an intentionally perverse attitude, a desire to be ‘difficult’. And yet, while on furlough from the halfway house of Self, Franzen managed to write *The Corrections*, a social novel and market melodrama of huge ambition, global scope and, most importantly, significant achievement. I will explore this contradiction in more detail below, but first I want to return to the question of realism after postmodernism.

The Right to Narrate and the Privatization of Experience

The first phase in the revitalization of realism, stretching from the 1980s to the early 1990s, grapples with the vexed inheritance of literary postmodernism, a task complicated by close proximity to the phenomenon in question. On the one hand, neo-realists were wary of the anti-mimetic tendency typical of postmodernism; on the other hand, they embraced the postmodernist legacy of flattened hierarchies, both in terms of

high/low culture and the cross-pollination of print and visual culture.²⁴ Robert Stone, editor of *Best American Short Stories 1992* (and an important novelist in his own right), suggests that as of the early 1990s, “American writers seem ready to accept traditional forms without self-consciousness in dealing with the complexity of the world around them” (xviii). Robert Rebein concurs: “It is not the job of later writers to simply *repeat* these [postmodern] experiments but rather to take what has been proven useful and put it to work where and how they may” (21). Moreover, Rebein argues that the revitalization of realism goes hand in hand with its absolute expansion. Rather than depend on a relatively constricted national narrative (the “Great American Novel”) or the literary canon to set the coordinates for what we recognize as realism, contemporary writers replot the grid according to “the renewed importance of the concept of place, and the expansion of our traditional ideas of authorship to include those who in the past would have appeared in our literature only as characters, and stereotypes at that” (7-8). The new realism, in other words, brackets metafictional issues and other formal quandaries raised by postmodernism while adopting a broadened—boundless, even—scope of inquiry.

The notion advanced above, of putting postmodernism “to work,” is symptomatic of Rebein’s study, *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists*, because much of his attention is commanded by the downbeat realm of dirty realism, a term he appropriates from Bill

²⁴ For some of the programmatic statements on postmodern aesthetics, see Hassan (*The Postmodern Turn*), Hutcheon (*A Poetics of Postmodernism*), Huyssen (*After the Great Divide*), McHale (*Postmodernist Fiction*), and Jameson (*Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*). On the very idea of “late” capitalism, see Ernest Mandel. David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity* remains the essential text for charting the underlying economic transition of the period in question, augmented by his recent efforts (*A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, *The New Imperialism*). Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* explores the challenges posed by postmodernist skepticism to more traditional epistemologies. Mark Taylor has recently published an intriguing reading of the reciprocities between contemporary finance, theory and art (*Confidence Games: Money and Markets in a World Without Redemption*). This is only a fraction of the ever-growing discourse on postmodernism and postmodernity.

Buford, editor of *Granta* (which published issues devoted to dirty realism in 1983 and 1986, featuring writers like Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, Louise Erdrich, Richard Russo, etc.). Rebein calls it “a kind of truncated documentary naturalism that told the ‘truth’ about America in the 1980s,” namely the grim realities of economic decline and the plight of the idled who were more likely to watch television than appear on it (42). Dirty realist fiction tends to depict inarticulate people whose opaque psychological state is available to the reader only indirectly, through the mediation of decontextualized surface details rendered in a tersely minimalist style (McCaffery “The Fictions of the Present” 1165). Accordingly, Winfried Fluck calls this sharp-focus realism and cites Raymond Carver as its exemplar (cf. Decker). In contrast to prior realisms, in which novels of the city (Howells) or even the suburbs (Updike) predominated, Carver’s fiction, Mark Schechner writes, exists in “the long shadow cast by the small town” (41). One reads Carver, he adds, “not simply as a short story writer but as a visitor from the Bureau of the Census to a world that no one before had troubled to count” (42). Dirty realism, then, describes the gritty existence of working class America—or rather an America where the working *class*, in the sense of a collective tradition based on, among other things, trade unionism, is only a memory. In its wake, isolated individuals were abandoned, bobbing alone in the choppy seas of un(der)employment. By the 1980s, deindustrialization had crippled the most organized section of the working class while the jobs that were replaced, *if* they were replaced, migrated toward the lower-paying, insecure, service industry. One of the tasks of realism after postmodernism, Rebein

argues, is to represent these “forgotten regions” and “marginal characters left largely untouched, or treated only as stereotypes, in previous American writing” (166).

In addition to class and place (i.e. regionalism), the new realism of the 1980s also turned its focus to matters of race and sex/gender. Women and minority writers, Rebein notes, “simply could not say, along with the mostly white eastern males of postmodernism, that their world had been represented to death. On the contrary, it had been represented hardly at all” (6). In this view, the reassertion of realism was an integral part of a broadly democratizing process as margins merged into the mainstream.

Kristiaan Versluys emphasizes the instrumental appeal of realism; in contrast to the supposed elitism and ‘difficulty’ of postmodernist writing, realism presents what one might think of, somewhat patronizingly, as a ‘lower barrier to entry’: “It talks about the specific and concrete circumstances in which humanity has to struggle and it does so with a directness detractors of the genre call naïve, but which has its advantages in terms of transparency and economy of means” (8). What was at issue was not necessarily *how* the story was told but *that it be told* in the first place. The right to narrate is as much—if not more—a political matter as it is a literary one, speaking to issues of access as well as aesthetics. The culture wars that erupted during the 1980s over issues like political correctness, federal arts funding controversies and especially the composition of the literary canon were fought over the question of just whose experiences and traditions were worthy of representation and deserving of the imprimatur of institutional recognition.

The right to narrate, then, fundamentally inflected the new realism by vastly expanding its potential scope through the recovery of suppressed traditions and the encouragement of previously estranged voices. At the same time, however, the emphasis on the authenticity of expression made it difficult to evaluate these narratives by any standard other than that of tautology. The very fact of their existence was an argument in their favour. This becomes problematic as the initial shock of the personal made political wears off. Once these representations are taken for granted—once they become unremarkable—the political reverts back to the personal, a form of privatization in keeping with neoliberalism. Accordingly, the testimonial form was smoothly integrated into America’s individualist culture as demonstrated by the explosion in memoirs, autobiographies and other forms of life writing during the 1990s. Indeed, the right to narrate has become an increasingly important component of consumerist self-regard and central to the construction of ‘lifestyle’. Identity politics of the 1970s and 1980s, in other words, served as the beachhead for market segmentation; countercultural radicalism served up as over-the-counter culture.²⁵

‘I’ to Eye

Jeremy Green takes note of the fact that Wendy Steiner’s entry on “Postmodern Fictions, 1970-1990” in the influential *Cambridge History of American Literature*

²⁵ Thomas Frank is the most noted chronicler of this process, especially in his first book, *The Conquest of Cool* (1997). Frank is also the editor of *The Baffler*, a little magazine devoted to critically examining American business culture and its employment of countercultural rhetoric of revolution and radicalism as a particularly effective marketing strategy. Two collections of criticism from *The Baffler* are representative: *Commodify Your Dissent* (1997) and *Boob Jubilee* (2003). Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter offer a similar critique in *The Rebel Sell* (2004), although they pay more attention to the roots of radical critique in academic cultural theory.

describes a trajectory arcing from the elitism of postmodernism through the recovery of minority voices and, more recently, toward the popular appeal of personal narratives, a realism “typified by the (re)discovery of the inner life of ordinary people” (26). Steiner offers this as “a narrative of progress, an overcoming of disabling cultural divisions and silences” (Green 27). The absolute expansion of what falls under realism’s purview, however, tells us little about how realism is practiced. Indeed, he is quite critical of Steiner’s account, charging that “her distrust of formal questions, and the embarrassment that attends her attempts to discriminate and evaluate texts” require her “to fall back on appeals to beauty, power, and wonder, terms that are refusals to construe, contextualize, or interpret” (27). The enchantment of the everyday celebrated by Steiner is also the subject of Joseph Dewey’s study of realism after postmodernism.

Dewey argues that 1980s American fiction, dominated up to that point by playful postmodern metafiction, “witnessed a significant reassertion of the realist novel” (9).²⁶

The catalyst for realism’s return was the two-term Reagan administration, which introduced a “gaudy theater of play” into American public life (20). Dewey focuses on Reagan’s persona, “a staggering bricolage, a depthless collage of decontextualized bits drawn from our cultural imagination, juxtaposed until that very instability of signs rendered for him a semblance of narrative consistency, a stable sense of character” (17).

What was striking about the fortieth president of the United States was not the artificiality of his public presentation, but the degree to which it penetrated his private experience.²⁷

²⁶ Some of the novelists examined in this study include Joyce Carol Oates, Richard Powers, Anne Tyler, John Irving, William Kennedy, and T. Coraghessan Boyle.

²⁷ Joan Didion’s essay, “In the Realm of the Fisher King” in *After Henry* is among the most incisive portraits of the Reagan White House (565-578).

Reagan, as critics like Michael Rogin have pointed out, seemed incapable of distinguishing between events in his own life and those in films, constructing a personal history out of both lived and found elements—“a sort of portrait of the artist as a plagiarist” (Dewey 17). What was truly remarkable about this self-made man, however, was the degree to which he himself *believed*, the way that he lived his artificiality *as authenticity*. It is this *felt* quality rather than his legislative achievements or political legacy that Dewey sees as instructive for understanding the era as a whole, for, as he points out, Reagan’s delusions were widely shared.

We participated in the decade. We elected to believe, for instance, in the elegant pseudoarithmetic of Reagonomics, historic cuts in taxes coupled with profligate spending, a sort of Master Carded “recovery” that violated the simplest rules of balancing a household checkbook.... Our complicity in the Reagan Era suggests that we something other than enchanted, drugged, gullible or simply victims of cynical fantasy wheelers intent on regaining political power.... We wanted Reagan to happen. (7)

After the dreary self-flagellation of the Carter years, Reagan’s limbic appeal fed into a widespread and ravenous appetite for spectacle.²⁸ In this reading, the 1980s function as a “fabulated zone” with the country as a whole inhabiting a play space physically realized in the era’s signature structure: Disney World.²⁹ Dewey sees theme parks, particularly Disney World, as emblematic of the decade’s embrace of play over work and hedonistic pursuit of pleasure as vitally restorative.

²⁸ Epitomized by his relentlessly cheery, remarkably banal and yet utterly effective 1984 campaign slogan: “It’s morning in America.”

²⁹ Adopting Disney World as a privileged symbol of the 1980s is slightly problematic given that the theme park first opened in 1971. That being said, successive stages were not completed until much later. The futuristic EPCOT Center (experimental prototype community of tomorrow), with its signature geodesic dome was finished in 1982 while the Disney-MGM Studios attraction wasn’t readied until 1989.

Realism reappears in this context in response to the prevailing unreality in American politics and culture: “amid the sheer excess of each magic zone we find ourselves gradually anaesthetized to the very spectacles meant to enthrall us” (20). The problem that Dewey seems to identify, however, is not with the spectacle itself but rather our inoculation against its effects. What he calls “spectacle realism” consists of fictions that seek to compensate for the waning appeal of the spectacle in public experience by elevating the immediate and everyday, by seeking out spectacles in the innocuous material of private life. Seeking to re-enchant daily life, spectacle realism is “a genre of realistic texts that offers an unapologetically ascendant sense of the immediate, a radical recognition born from full awareness of the flawed richness that, unsuspected and untapped, encloses each of us” (28). This affirmative tone, similar to what Green identified in Steiner’s account above, renders Dewey’s discussion deeply problematic as the larger stakes of the re-enchantment of the everyday, not to mention the relation of public life to private experience, go uninterrogated. For one thing, ‘spectacle’ is evacuated of any meaningful content aside from a general sense of pageantry.³⁰ Aside from increased visibility, what constitutes a basis for judgment? In fact, the problem with spectacle recalls another staple of 1980s popular culture: cocaine. Cocaine inoculates as it intoxicates; one can never recapture the buzz of the first high. By identifying inoculation as the problem rather than the “drug” itself, Dewey sidesteps the issue of our increased tolerance for—even addiction to—the spectacle. That being said, what is compelling about Dewey’s argument is his recognition that the relation between the

³⁰ It is troubling that Dewey makes no reference to Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, the text that inserted “spectacle” as a key term of critical debate.

spectacle and everyday reality is one of identity, not opposition. “As cultural documents of Reagan’s America, [these novels] fully understand the power and the possibilities and the suasion of spectacle. They seek not to reject play but rather to reenchant work” (21). Dewey describes this attitude as one of affirmation, the acknowledgement that the spectacle is unavoidably woven into the fabric of everyday life and thus an essential component of any realist representation of the period. Ironically, Dewey’s affirmation functions in exactly the opposite manner to what critical theorist Herbert Marcuse described as the affirmative character of culture.

Marcuse identifies a critical tendency stretching from its apogee in modernism back to Aristotle distinguishing between the realm of civilization (the material realm, subject to the tragedy of necessity) and culture (the ideal, the preserve of sublime beauty). This separation “initiated a development that abandons the field to the materialism of bourgeois practice on one hand and to the appeasement of happiness and the mind within the preserve of ‘culture’ on the other” (89). In its presumptive independence from the “real world,” what culture affirms is the existence of a transcendent realm of eternal and universal values—“the best which has been thought and said in the world,” as Matthew Arnold famously said. This affirmation mystifies the social totality (consisting of civilization *and* culture) by “segregating from civilization the mental and spiritual world as an independent realm of value that is also considered superior to civilization” (95). In other words, the affirmation of culture posits “a world essentially different from the factual world of the daily struggle for existence, yet realizable by every individual for himself ‘from within,’ without any transformation of the state of fact” (95). The existence

of culture as a separate (and hierarchically privileged) sphere of human existence tranquilizes critical thought by discouraging its application to the concrete world of practice. As an expression of tacit consent, culture “affirms and conceals the new conditions of social life” (96).

For Marcuse, the affirmative character of culture traditionally functioned as little more than a ruse, its utopianism an alibi for existing social inequalities. His concept of culture, however, falls on the wrong side of the postmodern divide. One of the widely accepted definitions of postmodernism is that it levels the distinction between “low” and “high” culture, introducing radical uncertainty as to the criteria by which “the best which has been thought and said” can be identified (not to mention *who* is responsible for making such judgments). As Jeremy Green points out, “the legitimating function of culture has been overtaken by the uses of culture as a commodity” (35). Postmodernism abolishes the autonomy of culture through its “prodigious expansion,” quite literally the culturalization of everything (Jameson *Postmodernism* 48). Postmodern art and culture, then, no longer exist in a negative relation to the wider world, affirming the existence of a better place, both elsewhere and otherwise. Everything is fully present, instead; everything is, as DeLillo writes, *connected*. This is the broader meaning of Dewey’s affirmation, one that exults in the ubiquity of beauty and experiences the spectacle in all its immediacy as liberating. Ironically, though, this leads to an even greater mystification than the one Marcuse warned against. “The spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute,” writes Guy Debord (15). Permanently dislodged from the vantage point of culture-as-distanced contemplation, the postmodern

individual finds total immersion equally hostile to measured reflection. The absolute dilation of culture proves unblinking. Spectacle realism is dazzled by all that lies before it, amazed and blinded both, the literary analogue to a much vaster failure of vision:

“Today, one cannot even imagine a viable alternative to late capitalism” (Žižek *Contingency*, 321).

Watching Oprah Reading

Dewey’s passivity in the face of the spectacle and Steiner’s reluctance to judge are both symptomatic of the tyranny of the visible, where “everything that appears is good; what is good will appear” (Debord 15). It signals a terminal phase in the right to narrate as it congeals into a new literalism, where the only basis of evaluation is affirming the authenticity of expression.³¹ In this, the recent James Frey scandal is instructive. Frey, Oprah laureate and author of the bestselling confessional narrative *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), wrote about his wrenching struggles with addiction, but was forced to recant when it turned out he had fabricated and embellished some of the details. Frey then mounted an apology tour, culminating with a cringing performance on Oprah Winfrey’s television show where the celebrated chat host grilled him about his deception and de-selected him from her book club. Duped readers launched a class action lawsuit against Random House, Frey’s publisher, which has since offered refunds to its angry customers. The publisher has even gone to the trouble of including a regretful letter of clarification along with a self-lacerating *mea culpa* from the author in recently printed versions of the

³¹ “Our sense of self has been so diminished that fiction—whose traditional domain is the relation of the private self to its public contexts—was preempted by the confessional shriek, a cry so intense and deafening that it hardly requires narrative momentum” (Newman 151).

book. What is notable about this otherwise overhyped episode is the expectation that the indignant reader should be mollified for having been duped into reading ... a novel.³² The depth of outrage stirred by Frey's dishonesty tells us a great deal about the new literalism: namely, the fetishization of accuracy and the insistence that contemporary narratives transmit documentary truth. The basic assumption here is that personal experience is the sole—and thus unimpeachable—source of meaning. Frey's prevarications offend not simply because of some overwhelming preference for the memoir over the novel but because absent any other standard of judgment (i.e. formalism) they threaten meaning itself.

The furor over *A Million Little Pieces* is particularly interesting because it featured prominently in the revival of Oprah's Book Club. Oprah Winfrey began her near-monthly Book Club in 1996 as an offshoot of her popular television talk show. It quickly turned into a publishing phenomenon; her legion of viewers could be counted upon to rocket any pick into the sales stratosphere (the "Oprah Effect"). Oprah not only selected novels, she promoted them by inviting authors like Toni Morrison onto her talk show and encouraging the audience/readers to join the discussion. From the very beginning, the Book Club has served as the barometer of American middlebrow taste. "Winfrey herself stated clearly and repeatedly what she thought the purpose of reading to be. Her show framed the appeal of reading as a thoroughly individual experience, at its most intense an experience of conversion," explains Green. "With this stress on the individualistic, life-changing nature of reading, the Book Club participated in the therapeutic and testimonial character of Winfrey's shows on other subjects" (83-84). By encouraging readers to

³² "The ideal postmodern novel, it seems, aspires not to be a novel at all," Green acerbically notes (26).

personalize the experience of reading as a matter of moral uplift, Winfrey counsels a relatively unsophisticated engagement with literature, one that tends to blur the line between fiction and biography.³³ “Novels are seen as occasions for identification: the situations of fictional protagonists in the chosen books typically prompted anecdotes and confessions from the audience members” (Green 84). After a brief hiatus in 2002-03, the Book Club returned, albeit in a slightly different format. Appearing far less frequently than the annual ten picks during its heyday, Oprah’s Book Club also shifted its focus from contemporary fiction to the classics: Tolstoy, Faulkner, Marquez, etc. When *A Million Little Pieces* was chosen in September 2005, it signaled yet another shift as Winfrey turned her attention to memoirs.

Ironically, the Frey scandal followed close upon the heels of another Book Club fiasco—and quite possibly a motivating factor in Oprah’s decision to take a brief break during 2002-03—Jonathan Franzen’s expulsion after he publicly registered some discomfort with the selection of his novel *The Corrections* (2001). For Franzen, who had previously written a lament in *Harper’s* on the decline of the audience for ‘serious’ literature, the Oprah episode should have proven a dream come true. It quickly turned into a nightmare when he let slip that this wasn’t necessarily the audience he wanted. He was uneasy with Oprah’s overtly personalized approach to literature, which he described as “schmaltzy” (“Meet Me in St. Louis” 300). Oprah abruptly rescinded her invitation

³³ To be fair, while I think that the reduction of literary criticism to personal reaction is problematic for the reasons outlined above, any evaluation of Oprah’s Book Club should also take into consideration its achievement in making literature accessible to irregular or otherwise uninclined readers. Certainly, a detailed analysis of the Book Club and its impact on both taste formation and the formation of a reading public is far beyond the scope of my discussion here. For dedicated studies of the Oprah aesthetic and the phenomenon of the Book Club itself, see Rooney and Farr.

and the predictable uproar ensued with the author cast as the villain of the piece, a pompous lit-snob. Franzen was being Mr. Difficult, to steal the wry title of an essay he wrote in the aftermath of the imbroglio. While primarily a sympathetic appraisal of the formidable stylist William Gaddis, “Mr. Difficult” begins by establishing a curious parallel between the formal difficulty of Gaddis’s work and Franzen’s public reputation for being ‘difficult’, which is to say, petulant: “I was getting a lot of angry mail from strangers. What upset them was not the novel... but some impolitic remarks I had made in the press,” he notes (238). Taking comfort in the fact that Gaddis, “had long deplored the reading public’s confusion of the writer’s work and the writer’s private self” (239), Franzen does a rather strange thing. He treats his detractors as if they were responding to the difficulty of his own work rather than his bad manners. Even though this is a shockingly transparent dodge, Franzen himself seems strangely oblivious to it. As James Wood concludes: “Franzen partly has himself to blame for the idiocy of his coverage because he repeatedly had recourse to the personal as a way of solving what should have been impersonal arguments” (“Jonathan Franzen” 197).

Franzen’s critique of Gaddis’s oeuvre in “Mr. Difficult” continues in a similarly self-contradictory vein. After lauding Gaddis’s debut *The Recognitions*, Franzen goes on to read his career as a trajectory of failure. Disappointed that the heady achievement of his first novel only belatedly received the recognition due to it, Gaddis retreated into ‘difficulty’ as a defensive posture. “He confided his faith and hope to a 956-page-thick vault, and he gave the grownup world one chance to recognize him,” Franzen hypothesizes. “When the world, inevitably, failed this test he took his talent to the

archetypically phony work of corporate PR, as if to say: ‘You’ll never catch me hoping again.’ The modern cry of pain became the postmodern bitter joke” (268). In sharp contrast to Gaddis’s sage counsel cited approvingly in the essay’s opening pages, Franzen performs a close reading of his “literary hero” by rooting the work in the personality of the author, precisely the approach “deplored” by Gaddis.³⁴ “A story like this, where the difficulty is the difficulty of life itself, is what a novel is for,” Franzen concludes, captivated by the noble figure of the isolated and embattled writer (269). Difficulty here has morphed from a textual quality to the more personal themes of struggle and redemption.

Whether this is an accurate summation of Gaddis’s career is beside the point; the individual described here resembles no one so much as Franzen himself. In a surprisingly unsophisticated act of projection, Franzen recognizes himself in the life story he imputes to Gaddis. More specifically, Franzen reads into Gaddis’s self-imposed isolation his own feelings of marginality at a time when the cultural capital once afforded to literature accrues to television. After his well-received first novel failed to resonate beyond the precincts of literary reviewing, Franzen was plunged into despair, despondent at “the failure of my culturally engaged novel to engage with the culture” (“Why Bother?” 61). He writes that the accoutrements of mid-market literary success, “the money, the hype, the limo ride to a *Vogue* shoot weren’t simply fringe benefits. They were the main prize, the consolation for no longer mattering to a culture” (61). Unlike Gaddis, who spurned the culture with his demanding prose, Franzen feels the culture has spurned him.

³⁴ “I was thinking of the artist and not the art,” admits Franzen, seemingly unaware of the contradiction between his own actions and Gaddis’s advice (266).

Conflating readerly resistance to challenging literature with cultural indifference to the author (and, after Oprah, active hostility), Franzen gravely dons the mantle of ‘difficulty’ because, like his mentor, he exists at a remove from the mainstream, albeit unwillingly.

Jonathan Franzen: Tragically Realistic

That the author should fall into striking self-contradictions under the strain of offending one of America’s most-loved celebrities and outraging a nation is unsurprising. What is remarkable is that the incongruity of these claims predate the Oprah affair. Indeed, they are quite evident in Franzen’s famous *Harper’s* essay “Perchance to Dream,” perhaps his most widely read and discussed piece of writing outside of *The Corrections*. Appearing six years after Wolfe’s “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast”—and in the pages of the same magazine—it served a similar function as a literary state of the union. Unlike Wolfe’s piece, however, Franzen’s report is markedly pessimistic—after revising it for publication in a collection of essays, he retitled it: “Why bother?”³⁵ Franzen’s address to the nation presumes a country populated solely, unapologetically, by himself.

Circumspect in his tone and insular in his focus, the author details his frustration with literature as a vocation. Curiously, given Franzen’s disdain for the therapeutic optimism of contemporary culture, the *Harper’s* essay was intended “to document a stalled novelist’s escape from the prison of his angry thoughts” (5). Franzen, mired in the early stages of what would eventually become *The Corrections*, was going through a writerly malaise. His problem was with his audience—or lack thereof. Conceding that the authoritative cultural role once occupied by literature has since been ceded to television

³⁵ My discussion is based on this updated version, included in *How to be Alone* (55-97).

and other popular entertainments (“television has killed the novel of social reportage”), Franzen came to the unpleasant realization that his presumed readership, the mythic mainstream, no longer exists.³⁶

The literary America in which I found myself after I published *The Twenty-Seventh City* bore a strange resemblance to the St. Louis I’d grown up in: a once-great city that had been gutted and drained by white flight and superhighways. Ringing the depressed urban core of serious fiction were prosperous new suburbs of mass entertainments. Much of the inner city’s remaining vitality was concentrated in the black, Hispanic, Asian, gay, and women’s communities that had taken over the structures vacated by fleeing straight white males. MFA programs offered housing and workfare to the underemployed; a few crackpot city-loving artists continued to hole up in old warehouses; and visiting readers could still pay weekend visits to certain well-policed cultural monuments—the temple of Toni Morrison, the orchestra of John Updike, the Faulkner House, the Wharton Museum, and Mark Twain Park. By the early nineties I was as depressed as the inner city of fiction. (62)

Suffering through an episode of what he calls *depressive* realism, Franzen was consumed with dark insights about the prospects for representing such a fragmented landscape. As a straight white male, he felt constrained from representing the social totality. But there was also the question of where he fit into this city of words—one imagines the tastefully bland accommodations of the business traveler, but it is a location left undisclosed by the author. “For the white male writer in particular,” explains Jeremy Green, “the problem is one of finding a place and stance from which to speak and be heard in a competitive arena of other voices, given that his own identity, formerly naturalized by the prevailing climate of the literary world, is now exposed as a particularly privileged subject position” (9). Stricken by bouts of (literary) paralysis and immobility, Franzen asks, why bother? “I can’t pretend the mainstream will listen to the news that I have to bring,” he muses. “I

³⁶ Don DeLillo also explores this territory in works like *Mao II*.

can't stomach any kind of notion that serious fiction is good for us because I don't believe that everything that's wrong with the world has a cure, and even if I did, what business would I, who feel like the sick one, have in offering it?" (73).

Mired in the muck of self-pity and bereft of purpose, Franzen rediscovers his vocation via a most unlikely encounter. Consulting a sociologist of reading habits, who empirically verifies that the general audience he so frantically seeks is a myth, Franzen learns that his ideal readership is not necessarily the living, breathing sort. The important dialogue in your life, he is told, "is with the authors of the books you read. Though they aren't present, they become your community" (77). Franzen feels a shock of recognition. The sociologist has provided an uncannily accurate description of him and, more importantly, solved his audience problem. "You are a socially isolated individual who desperately wants to communicate with a substantive imaginary world" (78). Rather than chase after the mythical mainstream, Franzen is now free to engage in a dialogue with his imaginary community of readers/writers (the canon?), or in other words, to begin writing for himself. Estrangement, he realizes, is not a disease, it is his nature (94). He regains momentum on his book and *The Corrections* turns out to be a fine example of the sort of social novel he despaired of ever writing—and more importantly, one that found its audience.

Reflecting on this experience, Franzen frames it as a shift from depressive realism to tragic realism. "The point of calling serious fiction tragic is to highlight its distance from the rhetoric of optimism that so pervades our culture," he explains. "Tragic realism preserves the recognition that improvement always comes at a cost; that nothing lasts

forever; that if the good in the world outweighs the bad, it's by the slimmest of margins" (92). Simply put, both realisms are steeped in the recognition of human limitations, but where the former was paralyzed by this knowledge, the latter is sustained, even liberated by it. Franzen, in other words, finds reason for optimism (an imagined community that he can "connect" with) even as he disparages the "rhetoric of optimism" in the culture at large. The contortions required to make sense of this apparent contradiction have not gone unnoticed. Ben Marcus, who wrote a sharp rejoinder to Franzen's piece in 2005, characterized it—a bit snidely—as an apologia for going "kicking and screaming into the mainstream" (42).

Marcus, in fact, brings the discussion of the new realism in the pages of *Harper's* full-circle. In contrast to Wolfe and Franzen, his manifesto champions experimental writing, which he opposes to a by-now decadent realism: "The fallacy that literary realists have some privileged relationship to reality has allowed the whole movement to soften and become false, which is also what artistic movements naturally do, no matter how significant" (42). If Wolfe's initial piece was meant to sway the pendulum of literary fashion away from experimentalism, Marcus demonstrates that it has now swung to the other extreme, thus requiring, as he waggishly subtitles his piece (*pace* Franzen), a correction.³⁷ Recapitulating Ian Watt's warning that when it becomes overly confident in its purchase on reality, realism becomes facile, Marcus argues for language itself as the source for literature's replenishment. The arguments for and against realism and experimentalism continue, the conflict itself perennial (stretching back at least as far back

³⁷ The full title: "Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It: A Correction".

as the extraordinary rendition of the poets in Plato's *Republic*). What is new about Marcus's account is the way that he locates this debate in contemporary cultural politics. He accuses Franzen of employing demagogic and contradictory rhetoric of elitism to smear experimental writers. Moreover, he accuses him of being a self-hating writer, one who cannot enjoy his own success because in so publicly agonizing over the eclipse of literature he only recognizes sources of cultural approval that emanate from other media, other fields. "With Franzen so busy staring longingly out from literary pastures at other forms of thriving media—movies, television, and the Internet—he proves an undesirable champion and a pundit deeply antagonistic to writing" (46)

Franzen's tragic realism, his narrative of hard-won insight, is assailed by Marcus as self-serving, a justification for going mainstream from an author dissatisfied with the response to his earlier, more 'difficult' works (which is to say, unread). What's worse, Marcus continues, is that having made his accommodation, Franzen uses it as the standard by which to judge other writers, whom he castigates for willfully spurning the mainstream and condemns as elitist—from his own lofty perch as a critically lauded and best-selling novelist, not to mention a writer for both *The New Yorker* and *New York Times*, elite organs in the construction of American taste. "I am not advocating the complex or difficult approach as the superior one, or claiming that it is better than seeking to commune with the largest possible audience," Marcus explains, "but when a major, prize-winning novelist seeks frequent occasions to attack and diminishing an even more powerless avant-garde and its readership, a response is in order" (51). While the skirmishing between the two amounts to the small beer of a literary feud, it is hard not to

see that Franzen has made himself fair game by making it *about him*. Tragic realism, as he tells it, is less about a style than it is a stance (his own). The realism invoked here is not part of a literary tradition with its own history and set of conventions—the “deep engineering of realism” (Marcus 42)—but a pragmatic awakening (his own). In fact, it is not entirely clear what tragic realism might mean outside of Franzen’s own experience. The tragedy, one is forced to conclude, is that even as the laurels wither and the accolades grow faint (in contrast to the raucous din at sporting events and television awards shows), Franzen soldiers on, having rediscovered his vocation as a writer after abandoning his ambition to stand as a public figure in an age where writers (unlike celebrities) are nothing of the sort.

Ultimately, the problem with Franzen’s piece is the gulf between the problem he identifies (the vanishing general audience) and the solution that he offers (tragic realism). Tragic realism is less a strategy for representing this juncture than it is a subjective adjustment to it, the tragedy of how Jonathan Franzen became *realistic*. The *Harper’s* essay offers, of all things, a therapeutic narrative of adjustment, telling the reader how Franzen overcame feelings of disappointment and rage at his own marginalization as a writer in a visual culture. Happier and content, he would go on to publish *The Corrections*, a wildly successful social novel that provides a pleasing moral. Franzen, no longer obsessed with finding the general audience, promptly finds it. The implication, of course, is that success will find those who choose to be realistic and eschew difficulty. It’s a self-satisfied and complacent attitude that Marcus does well to skewer. Whether it proves his contention that the new realism has exhausted its promise and plunged into a

spiral of introspection and decline remains to be seen. What is clear is that as the aesthetic mandate of realism is supplanted by the cultural imperative to be realistic (“get real!”), the advice that Don DeLillo once offered to Franzen threatens to go unheeded: “The writer leads, he does not follow” (op cit. Franzen 95).

Market Melodramas

Franzen’s third novel is a fine example of the revitalized social novel anticipated by Wolfe in his *Harper’s* essay. *The Corrections* tells the story of a Midwestern family, the Lamberts, who are all one way or another implicated in the melodrama of the market at millennium’s close. Alfred, the rigid patriarch, is in the grips of Parkinson’s and sliding into dementia; Enid, his harried wife and mother to their three children, struggles with Alfred’s illness and frets over her wayward children, whom she wants to return home for one last Christmas. Gary, the eldest, is a successful investment banker, a proud father and frustrated husband. Denise, the youngest, is a professional chef whose personal life is wreaking havoc on her career (she carries on separate affairs with her boss and his wife). Chip, a failed academic and failing screenwriter, is the protagonist; Franzen provides him with the most fully realized dramatic arc in the novel and the source of much of its comedy. When we meet him—in a chapter entitled “The Failure”—Chip is fresh off a humiliating affair with a student that saw him fired for professional misconduct. Obsessed with writing a revenge-script, he is reduced to part-time proofreading jobs, borrowing money from Denise, and marveling at his own ineptitude.

Since D— College had fired him, the market capitalization of publicly traded U.S. companies had increased by thirty-five percent. In these same twenty-two

months, Chip had liquidated a retirement fund, sold a good car, worked half-time at an eightieth-percentile wage, and still ended up on the brink of Chapter 11. These were years in America when it was nearly impossible not to make money, years when receptionists wrote MasterCard checks to their brokers at 13.0% APR and still cleared a profit, years of Buy, years of Call, and Chip had missed the boat. (103)

Chip's luck begins to turn, somewhat improbably, when the estranged husband of his current and soon to be ex-girlfriend offers him employment in a Lithuanian scheme to bilk gullible foreign investors. Gitanas is a former politician, current head of the Free Market Party Company and sometimes gangster. Seeking to reassure Chip, who exhibits some anxiety about his safety in the 'Wild East', he coyly admits: "Maybe I'm a criminal warlord myself, a little bit" (117).

Gitanas has an interesting biography, one reminiscent of Max Borodin in Jack Womack's *Let's Put the Future Behind Us*, which I discuss in my concluding chapter. Initially caught up in the thrill of overthrowing the Soviet system and the romance of capitalism, Gitanas was quickly disillusioned as his country was first inundated by the volatile flows of international capital and then left high and dry. "Your country which saved us also ruined us," he tells Chip. "The collective fungible assets of my country disappeared in yours without a ripple... A rich powerful country made the rules we Lithuanians are dying by. Why should we respect those rules?" (114, 116). Under the auspices of the Free Market Party Company, Gitanas is determined to extract his pound of flesh from those faceless investors who profited from the piecemeal asset stripping and capital flight that so traumatized his country. Inspired by an entrepreneurial combination of patriotic fervour and venal self-interest, Gitanas hires Chip to write glowing prospectuses, submit false financial statements, spread rumours in investor chat rooms,

and generally con the stupid, seduce the greedy, and gull the gullible. In the frenzy of the overheated technology boom of the late nineties, there was no end of willing victims crowding after a hot tip. “The lesson that Gitanas had learned and that Chip was now learning was that the more patently satirical the promises, the lustier the influx of American capital” (439).

Franzen goes to great lengths to emphasize the uncanny identity shared between the two. “In almost every respect—coloration, shape of head, height and build, and especially the wary, shame-faced smile that he was wearing—Gitanas looked more like Chip than anybody Chip could remember meeting. He was like Chip with bad posture and crooked teeth” (108). Gitanas is Chip’s formerly Second World secret sharer; the two men are connected by a bond that encompasses physical resemblance, sexual attraction, fraternal obligation and narcissistic satisfaction. “Chip felt less like a sibling of Gitanas than his girlfriend,” Franzen writes. “He was a valued employee, a vulnerable and delightful American, an object of amusement and indulgence and even mystery; what a great pleasure it was, for a change, to be the pursued one—to have qualities and attributes that somebody else so wanted” (441). In finding his double Chip finally ‘sees’ himself, a failure no longer. Working to defraud unsuspecting foreign investors, he “felt as if, finally, here in the realm of pure fabrication, he’d found his *métier*” (439).

The stability of his newfound self-image, though, proves fragile. Globalization produces a confusing welter of second-order reflections in a world that has been made over in America’s image through a complex web of trade accords, investment protocols and overall financial market integration—i.e. the ‘Washington Consensus’—not to

mention the spectacular appeal of American pop culture. In a neoliberal hall of mirrors, reflections destabilize the very identity they once confirmed. Chip's idyllic interlude in Lithuania—"he found Vilnius a lovely world of braised beef and cabbage and potato pancakes, of beer and vodka and tobacco, of comradeship, subversive enterprise, and pussy" (441)—comes to a screeching halt when the country collapses into anarchy. Already strained by a rapacious post-Soviet privatization drive and buffeted by global financial turmoil, the tottering state collapses amidst the feuding of rival criminal oligarchs. Ironically, the first hint of the gathering storm comes when Chip calls home. Making conversation with the addled Alfred, he asks what is on the news. "Tell Chip," Alfred told Chip, whom he didn't recognize, "that there's trouble in the East" (452). The next morning, Chip awakes to find Lithuania under martial law, the security detail largely vanished and angry mobs in the street. As a very minor warlord, it is all Gitanas can do to get Chip to the Polish border and, eventually, home. Chip's whirlwind Cook's Tour of globalization ends up back at his childhood home in St. Jude, just in time for the family Christmas. "Nowhere in the nation of Lithuania was a room like the Lambert living room" (540).

Suzanne Rohr offers *The Corrections* as both "a novel of globalization" and an example of the "new conventionalism" (104, 102). While they may seem mutually contradictory, the coincidence of opposites, Rohr argues that Franzen's achievement is to have risen to the challenge of representing both levels simultaneously: "the effects of globalization find their way into the closest social relations. [...] They encroach upon personal and intimate relations until an inner order reproduces the dominant external

mechanisms” (102). This is particularly evident in the way that Franzen employs financial metaphors to elucidate the psychology of his characters. Chip, for example, recalls the guilt of waking up beside his student, the ill-starred object of his affection: “In a matter of seconds, like a market inundated by a wave of panic selling, he was plunged into shame and self-consciousness. He couldn’t bear to stay in bed a moment longer” (57).

Meanwhile, he dreads meeting his sister for lunch, because “she’d sounded like the World Bank dictating terms to a Latin debtor state, because, unfortunately, Chip owed her some money” (30). Where Franzen uses market metaphors to *describe* Chip’s mental state, his brother Gary—the banker—self-consciously *expresses himself* in these terms, particularly when under stress or, in this case, drunk. “*What this stagnating economy needs*, thought Federal Reserve Board Chairman Gary R. Lambert, *is a massive infusion of Bombay Sapphire gin*” (162, italics in original). Frustrated with a nebulously difficult home life—his marriage, for example, “no longer contained sufficient funds of love and goodwill to cover the emotional costs” (194)—Gary consoles himself by adopting broad market sentiment as his own: “Depressed? He was not depressed. Vital signs of the rambunctious American economy streamed numerically across his many-windowed television screen” (225).

Ironically, of all the Lamberts it is Alfred—a retiree slipping into his dotage—who is most intimately caught up in the melodrama of the market. A basement inventor and retired engineer from the Midland Pacific Railroad, Alfred holds the patent central to a process that a biotech company, the Axon Corporation, is eager to develop. Alfred’s invention—ferroacetate gel—is the medium in which Axon promises to combine “the

world of neurons with the world of printed circuits”; “the previously unthinkable: direct, quasi-real-time, digital-chemical interface” (188, 196). When Axon offers a measly five thousand dollars for the rights, Gary advises his father to hold out. Through contacts, Gary discovers that Axon is seeking venture backing. “Evidently Alfred’s five-thousand-dollar process was at the center of a process for which Axon now hoped to raise upward of \$200 million” (192). Coreck tall, “a revolutionary neurobiological therapy,” promises to improve the hard-wiring of the human brain—making cells “instantaneously self-correcting”—and, tantalizingly, promises to possibly even reverse the decay that Alfred himself is suffering from (189). Franzen, in other words, holds out the possibility that through the mediation of the marketplace and, more specifically, the Axon Corporation, Alfred’s intellectual property—his patent—can ‘correct’ his recalcitrant physiology. *The Corrections* takes “us into an orbit where the imagination changes the political, the emotional, and occasionally, the physical ground rules of existence” (Bukiet 14). However, as Alfred discovers, “what makes correction possible also dooms it” (317). The dynamic logic of self-overcoming that enables the market to bridge the gap between mind and matter (‘ferroacetate gel’) simultaneously dissolves the distinction between public and private experience. “[In] Alfred’s declining ability to make sense of his own perceptions and to create a larger narrative for them, we glimpse the contours of a reality that is utterly bewildering” (Rohr 98).

In its treatment of Parkinson’s, *The Corrections* is not alone. In *Moral Hazard* (2002), Kate Jennings uses Alzheimer’s to similar effect. *Moral Hazard* tells the story of Cath, a bohemian writer and one-time student radical who reluctantly finds herself

working on Wall Street during the bull market. “You are meeting me at a time when my judgment was suspended, my taste in literature, or anything else, for that matter, irrelevant. I didn’t have the luxury. The reason was my husband Bailey,” Cath tells us (11). Some years older than his wife, Bailey is a collage artist who has been stricken with Alzheimer’s. Discovering that “disease is expensive, beyond the means of a freelance writer,” Cath finds work as a speechwriter for Niedecker, a New York investment bank (21). Her days spent negotiating the corporate pedantry so ably satirized in *American Psycho*, Cath’s nights are spent in a similarly disorienting environment: “I was commuting, it seemed, between two forms of dementia, two circles of hell. Neither point nor meaning to Alzheimers, nor to corporate life, unless you count the creation of shareholder value” (33). Bailey’s condition worsens to the point that he has to be institutionalized; visiting him at the nursing home, Cath is devastated as he alternately pleads with her and rages at her for leaving him behind. “I had consigned him to a place where behaviour was infantile, instincts animal. A place of last things” (79). In *The Corrections*, Alfred bleakly considers a similar fate: “Without privacy there was no point in being an individual. And they would give him no privacy in a nursing home” (465).

While her personal life is a shambles, Cath’s professional life has begun to improve. Striking up a cigarette friendship with Mike, Niedecker’s risk manager, Cath is surprised to discover that like her, he’s “a rabble-rouser from the sixties” (40). As he and Cath smoke, he patiently tutors her on the vagaries of arbitrage and high finance, lessons imparted with great skepticism—one wonders whether the bitterness is eased by his outlandish compensation or made all the more acrid by his evident hypocrisy. Cath is

sensitive to the vast gap between his words and his actions; at times Mike disappears into the cynical middle distance. While a particularly acute case, he is far from alone.

“Nearly everyone at Niedecker claimed to be above the fray, going along with the absurdities of corporate life, while laughing up their sleeves. Yet they guarded their positions on the food chain with the single-mindedness, the savagery, of wolves” (167).³⁸

Still, with Mike’s help, Cath soon finds her stock rising at Niedecker. She ends up working for Horace, head of Investment Banking, a dashing figure who welcomes her to his employ: “We need people like you at Niedecker. People who are different. Who will bring us fresh ideas” (64). Horace’s greeting is indicative of both his impeccable manners but also his utter confidence in the powers of the market to tame dissent, co-opt criticism and ultimately capitalize on absolutely everything.³⁹ Cath finds him a decent-enough boss to write for, even though he is “a demon about punctuation and English usage, gleeful when he caught me out on a mistake. In this, he was no different from other banking executives: picky about small things, nonchalant about big ones. The anxiety of their jobs had to surface somewhere” (80-81).

The climax of the novel comes as Cath wrestles with a difficult decision. Bailey, having asked her long ago to take care of things should he become incapacitated, is in increasing pain and that dreadful time has arrived. “I was nearly six years into the job. Six years into the disease...” (128). Meanwhile, the markets are in a crisis. Russia’s unexpected 1998 debt default and currency devaluation didn’t chart on any Wall Street model and the bankers at Niedecker are utterly consternated. Cath is scornful: “As if

³⁸ Overcoming this cynical distance is more or less the point of *Fight Club*.

³⁹ Eric Packer, the protagonist of *Cosmopolis*, shares Horace’s hubris—if not his grace.

bankers were innocent bystanders and not the market's puppeteers... as if they had not joined the scramble to take advantage of Russia for fear of being left out of a killing" (139). Mike, moreover, might have intentionally exposed the firm to added risk. Convinced that the unregulated activities of hedge funds are out of control, such as the speculative raiding that crippled the Thai baht in 1997, he predicts disaster with a perverse glee. Going through a mid-life crisis of sorts, he raves to Cath: "With computers, you could bring the monetary system down. It would be easy. The whole frigging house of cards. You'd just need to lean on it a little. That's all it would take. Someone should" (118). The Russia meltdown "was the mayhem he'd predicted" (136).

As Cath surreptitiously plans for Bailey's mercy killing, dealing with a friendly doctor willing to provide pills—"he asked too much of me, my darling husband" (164)—the aftershocks of the Russian debacle continue to rock Wall Street. Long Term Capital Management, a leading hedge fund that was horribly overexposed, went belly-up; its mammoth losses miniscule in terms of the potential liabilities its partners now faced.⁴⁰ A summit was called by the Federal Reserve with the leading Wall Street banks in attendance, including Niedecker's representative Horace. Cath watches in disbelief as they proceed to negotiate a bail-out. Instead of euthanizing the fund, they decide to resuscitate it; a textbook case of moral hazard (there is no incentive not to fail). "As the drama unfolded and the rationalizing and the spinning of facts began in earnest, my incipient conservatism collapsed. I was back where I began, only moreso, cynical as an old-time, hard-bitten, newsroom journalist. And as outraged as if I'd been sold the

⁴⁰ The Long-Term debacle figures prominently in chapter three, where I use it to counterpoint to Eric's similarly epic meltdown in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*.

Brooklyn Bridge” (152). What particularly galls Cath is that even after all the post-mortems, loud declamations of responsibility and accountability, a Presidential Working Group on Financial Markets and other ostentatious displays of remorse, the industry proceeds along in the same manner as before. “To date, no follow-up. Nothing. Nada. As if afflicted by Alzheimers, the Fed remains adamant that banks can police themselves” (153).

Unlike the other novels discussed in this study, *The Corrections* and *Moral Hazard* neither resort to depravity in order to evoke the asubjective, non-psychological drive of capital nor do they offer brutal physical violence as corollary to ‘structural’ violence.⁴¹ There are no villains in either novel, really. Cath’s immediate superior in the Niedecker hierarchy, the obsequious Hanny, is irritating but harmless. In *The Corrections*, only the Wroth brothers, the faceless speculators who run the Orfic group might qualify, but their excesses are presented in an entirely different light than, say, Patrick Bateman. The Wroths are the buy-out specialists who carve up Midland Pacific, Alfred’s former employer, in a frenzy to sell the pieces off in pursuit of short-term profits (“corporate self-vandalism”).⁴² Their actions are imbued with an evangelical fervour; they are market fundamentalists. “It’s a Baptist morality gone sour... [they] can’t abide that we admitted any principle but the ruthless pursuit of profit,” Alfred’s co-worker tells him. Since “they hate what they can’t comprehend” they take pleasure in “sowing salt in the fields of the financially unrighteous” (70). Even Gitanas, who claims that he is a gangster capitalist,

⁴¹ Ellis, of course, personifies real antagonism in the form of the titular yuppie psychopath; Palahniuk, a masochistic terrorist; DeLillo, a ruthless financier; and Gibson, a perversely inbred family/corporation.

⁴² “What survived of the Midpac’s trunk lines had been sold off to enable the company to concentrate on prison-building, prison management, gourmet coffee, and financial services; a new 144-strand fiber-optic cable system lay buried in the railroad’s old right of way” (155).

lacks the bloody enthusiasm of some of his rivals. “My problem,” he reflects, “is it’s easier for me to be shot than to shoot” (449).

Instead of criminal and/or perverse psychopathology, both Jennings and Franzen use the pathology of disease to suggest an affinity between disoriented mental states and the senseless frenzy of the market. Illness mirrors the instabilities of late capitalism. In *Moral Hazard*, Jennings draws a parallel between Bailey’s failing memory and Wall Street’s willed amnesia whereas in *The Corrections*, Franzen goes even further, hinting that financial market volatility seeps into the body even as ‘contagion’ infects the mind. Indeed, Alfred’s condition broadly tracks market sentiment as it attends global financial turmoil. He even performs as a leading indicator, at least for Chip (“there’s trouble in the East”). “The text focuses on the undermining forces of insecurity, disintegration, and loss of familiar structures of experience—all of which are related to the threats of globalization—through a symbolic textual reenactment of Alfred’s illness,” notes Rohr. “That illness loosens his grip on reality, and his experience of an ever more enigmatic reality constitutes the general frame of reference in and for the novel” (103). Perhaps the most devastating blow for Alfred is his mounting inability to maintain the distinction between public appearance and private experience. “His affliction offended his sense of ownership,” Franzen writes (67). In the following section, I will explore how Alfred’s sense of impoverishment stems from a concept of subjectivity rooted in self-possession and how, under finance, the liberal self is undone.

FROM POSSESSIVE INDIVIDUALISM TO THE INDIVIDUAL POSSESSED

Not coincidentally, the novel and the modern individual arose in tandem with one another in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a period that produced both Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and the political theory of liberalism espoused by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. At the heart of this new philosophy was the emphasis on individual experience, which supplanted collective tradition "as the ultimate arbiter of reality" (Watt 14). What Ian Watt calls the novel's "formal realism" consists of precisely those literary conventions that allow it to seamlessly approximate the psychology of the modern individual, ranging from its exploration of interiority, the creation of recognizable personalities through using proper rather than allegorical names, interest in the quotidian elements of everyday life, and strong plotting that privileges causality over coincidence—reinforcing the notion of individualism put forward by Locke, understood "as an identity of consciousness through duration in time" (Watt 21). Realism in the novel is inextricable from this emerging liberal notion of the self, one characterized by what C. B. MacPherson calls "possessive individualism."

The problem, as I will discuss below, is that the relation between possessive individualism and classical liberalism is as much contradictory as it is complementary. In fact, it functions as what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (in a slightly different context) call a disjunctive synthesis, "in that it simultaneously connects and cuts, attaches and separates" (*Multitude* 241). To this, the novel offers the illusion of holism. Since both sides of the disjunctive synthesis are contained within the narrative, the novel itself serves as at least the promise of a larger unity. What is illusory about this is that the novel

doesn't so much encompass the disjunctive synthesis as it mediates between terms, in effect occupying the gap between them. As Slavoj Žižek explains, "narrative as such emerges in order to resolve some fundamental antagonism by rearranging its terms into a temporal succession" (*Plague* 11). The rise of the novel, then, is less a matter of the objective development or unfolding of literary forms as it is the response to a specific deadlock: the disjunctive synthesis of classical liberalism and possessive individualism. The novel's characteristic dynamism in representing reality is as much a product of this conflict as it is an advancement in literary technique.

The novel's persistence over four centuries and continuing vitality today attests to its unparalleled ability to evoke the modern self. Conflicted and contradictory, this self is the product of competing claims on identity exerted by liberal ideals and possessive individualism. The novel displaces this structuring antagonism at the heart of modern subjectivity by dramatizing internal conflict in terms of outward struggle. Animated by the disjunctive synthesis, agonistic characters are central to a realist representational strategy. In what follows, I will provide a brief history of this disjunctive synthesis in order to contextualize its function in contemporary fiction. As already noted, the reassertion of the neo-realist novel in the 1980s and 1990s moves in tandem with the revival of neoliberalism after almost a half-century of state intervention. Ironically, however, while the tension generated by the disjunctive synthesis once undermined the individual's sense of obligation to the state, today the opposite is the case. With the rise of finance,⁴³ the rhetoric of ownership that constitutes the modern self has mutated and

⁴³ "The financial system has achieved a degree of autonomy from real production unprecedented in capitalism's history," (Harvey *Condition* 194)

metastasized, undermining the very possibility of a stable identity understood in terms of possessive individualism. The self, then, and not the state, is suffering through a legitimization crisis, one subjectively experienced today in terms of “agency panic”—since agency is seen as the basic “property” of the liberal self (Melley 10).

The roots of the disjunctive synthesis

In his classic study *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (1962), MacPherson suggests that the rise of liberalism is both founded upon *and* founders on a particularly modern conception of identity. Possessive individualism is MacPherson’s term for the human residue left behind as the organic bonds of traditional group relationships (e.g. family) are devalued and dissolved in a matrix of impersonal and abstract contractual relations—the market. Accordingly, the possessive individual, he suggests, was “created in the image of market man” (269). With its rhetoric of ownership, possessive individualism provides a subjective attitude commensurate to the abstract universality of liberal democracy. Ownership provides the minimal basis for reification in one’s subjective attitude towards oneself and towards others, since what is understood to be universal about (liberal) human experience is this sense of self-possession.

Its possessive quality is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself. The relationship of ownership, having become for more and more the critically important relation determining their actual freedom and actual prospect of realizing their full potentialities, was read back into the nature of the individual. The individual, it was thought, is free inasmuch as he is proprietor of his person and capacities. The human essence is freedom from

dependence on the wills of others, and freedom is a function of possession. Society becomes a lot of free equal individuals related to each other as proprietors of their own capacities and of what they have acquired by their exercise. Society consists of relations of exchange between proprietors. Political society becomes a calculated device for the protection of this property and for the maintenance of an orderly relation of exchange. (MacPherson 3)

Possessive individualism is a crucial development in liberal subjectivity because it enshrines in concrete practice (the marketplace) the liberal theory that the social relation is formal rather than substantive. Classical liberalism is a procedural ideal in that the liberal state guarantees and upholds the autonomy and neutrality of interactions among its citizens. “Beyond establishing rules for mutual self-preservation, liberal societies do not attempt to define any positive goals for their citizens or promote a particular way of life as superior or desirable to another,” explains Francis Fukuyama. “Whatever positive content life may have has to be filled by the individual himself” (160). In theory, the state intervenes only to the extent that its efforts are required to police a standard of abstract equality (in practice, however...). Society is reduced to the secondary effect of a legal fiction, that one’s relations with others are contractual in nature: voluntary obligations freely entered.

Possessive individualism was soon at odds with the liberal theory that it is so closely identified with. Liberalism depends on everyone acting in the abstract. Obligation to the liberal state, then, depends on individuals seeing themselves, “as equal in some respect more fundamental than all the respects in which they are unequal” (MacPherson 272). The problem, suggests MacPherson, was that economic inequality soon trumped democratic equality as the basis for social experience. As the market developed, “it destroyed certain prerequisites for deriving a liberal theory from

possessive assumptions, while yet the society conformed so closely to those assumptions that they could not be abandoned” (4). By the middle of the nineteenth century, the correspondence between possessive individualism and liberal democracy was unraveling. The problem was twofold. First the rise of working class militancy made it impossible to ignore the widening gulf between liberal rhetoric and market outcomes. Formal equality was belied by inequality of distribution. What’s more, these class divisions could not be dismissed solely as the unfortunate legacy of the ancien regime since they were clearly a product of the capitalist system itself. As a result, “men no longer saw themselves fundamentally equal in an inevitable subjection to the determination of the market” (MacPherson 273). This fostered an atmosphere of lasting skepticism, undermining the seeming inevitability of possessive market relations. In response, the capitalist class sought to dull the sharp edge of complaint by reining in some of the more egregious examples of exploitation (adopting minimal workplace safety regulations, cutting back on the length of the workday, etc.) and extending the franchise (a gesture complicated by regressive measures like poll taxes, literacy tests, cultural intransigence, etc.). This precipitated a second crisis, because one of the reasons why possessive individualism seemed to complement rather than contradict liberal democracy was the cohesion of the propertied class, united in self-interest. With the extension of the franchise, the dissonance of class conflict interrupted the harmony of a political class that formerly spoke in one voice, further eroding the legitimizing function of this synthesis by highlighting its disjunctive nature.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the growing tension between possessive individualism and classical liberalism was eclipsed by the rise of mass society, particularly in the context of the world wars.⁴⁴ Total mobilization of national populations projected internal divisions outward onto an absolute enemy; the passion of nationalism superseded dispassionate market relations. Beset by recurring economic crises and the exigencies of wars both hot and cold, the American government regularly superseded the limited role of the state envisioned by classical liberalism. Though pointedly neither communist nor socialist, the “American century” was marked by a collectivist ethos (i.e. the welfare state, the national security state, the corporate state). While American culture of the time was stridently individualistic, deeds put lie to words as the state intervened into the economy to an unprecedented degree; through planning and coordination it sought to protect liberal democracy from its enemies and, more importantly, from itself. This interventionist (and expansionist) stance, however, faced a significant challenge by the 1970s as the long post-war economic boom that funded it finally came to a halt. Moreover, the Keynesian remedies dispensed by an activist state were losing their efficacy. Keynesian calculations were based on the presumption that the government could manage the economy through carefully calibrated counter-cyclical fiscal policy. When the economy went into recession the government could stimulate demand through deficit spending; when it was in a boom, the government could keep it from overheating with a

⁴⁴ Perhaps the predominance of modernism during the early twentieth century (and romanticism before that) attests to a realist representational crisis: the tension generated by this disjunctive synthesis, which was responsible for the novel’s dynamic presentation of reality in the first place, grew *too* powerful as the dialectic between liberalism and possessive individualism became increasingly strained. As a result, realism—which was always to a degree “pressurized” by this antagonism—*exploded*, its fragments scattering far and wide. This shattered landscape inspired a variety of non-representational literary experiments (e.g. vorticism) designed to capture what realism no longer could.

more restrained policy of reduced spending and higher taxes. Fiscal policy—and by extension, the government—appeared helpless in the face of stagflation, that ailment particular to the 1970s that saw inflation rise as economic growth stalled and employment plunged, baffling economists who previously thought that these measures were positively correlated. Given the increasing futility of fiscal fixes for stagflation, Keynesianism was soon eclipsed by supply-side economics, or monetarism. Supply-siders insisted that any attempts to regulate the demand side of the economy through taxing and spending threatened to distort the market. The best of human intentions expressed through planning, they claimed, were no substitute for the collective intelligence of market signals (i.e. prices). Instead, monetarists advised the government to restrict itself to controlling the money supply, thus keeping its fiscal footprint light. The idea here was to tame inflation by ensuring the quantity of money in circulation kept pace with the level of economic growth. The rest of the economy would take care of itself, so to speak. Unemployment, for example, would settle at its “natural” rate as determined by the free play of market forces (supply and demand). Any attempt to defeat these forces (i.e. striving for full employment) would put inflationary pressures on the economy, inviting another crisis. Where Keynesians sought to tame the oscillations of the disjunctive synthesis, monetarists argued that these attempts served only to disturb the market’s fragile equilibrium.

The rationale for the interventionist state, then, faltered with its inability to manage the economy in the 1970s. In its place, the ascendance of the monetarists signaled the resurgence of classical liberalism, which saw the state as adjutant to the

market. This is not to be confused with the popular understanding of ‘liberal’ as inclusive and generous, characteristics more associated with the welfare state than laissez-faire economics. For this reason, critics have settled on ‘neoliberalism’ to describe the contemporary revival of the liberalism associated with Hobbes and Locke as opposed to the progressivism of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal. Relieved of its responsibilities for social welfare, the neoliberal state reverts back to its classical role: secure property rights, ensure the uninterrupted function of the market, and extend it to hitherto un- or undercolonized areas (ranging from biotechnology patents to the regime of free trade accords that have woven the world ever more tightly together in the web of globalization). Neoliberalism’s “back to basics” approach to market ideology, though, differs from classical liberalism in at least one significant respect. Since the 1970s, finance has quickly overtaken and supplanted the “productive” sector (i.e. the manufacturing of physical goods) to the point that “the economy is not simply dependent on the finance sector, but modeled upon it” (Martin 33).⁴⁵

Financialization aggravates the dynamic conflict inherent in the disjunctive synthesis. At the same time, it erodes the very basis of identity premised on possessive individualism because, as Martin notes, “pleasure moves from possession to ownership” (67); the physical fact of possession is replaced by an abstract claim. Among other things, finance enables the ownership of previously uncommodified areas of everyday life, extending the market’s sway into even the most intimate of spaces. At the

⁴⁵ “During the 1970s,” David Harvey explains, “large corporations became more and more financial in their orientation, even when, as in the automobile sector, they were engaging in production. Since 1980 or so it has not been uncommon for corporations to report losses in production offset by gains from financial operations (everything from credit and insurance operations to speculating in volatile currency and futures markets).” (*A Brief History of Neoliberalism* 32)

same time, ownership itself is rationalized as it is subsumed under the logic of exchange. One consequence of this is the relation between ownership and possession, formerly direct and immediate,⁴⁶ drifts apart. The paradox of financialization, then, is that even as ownership is intensified (exacerbating the tensions inherent in the disjunctive synthesis) it is also attenuated, since ownership is increasingly mediated through the market. “The displacement of the industrial, productive, or real economy by the financial economy involved a shift from privileging material to immaterial assets,” explains Mark Taylor. “As the real becomes a shadow of what it once seemed to have been, the economy became more spectral” (142). Speculative profits depend on an ever-increasing velocity of trades, which is to say, transfer of ownership in the form of securities. “When one holds a security, the title is to no simple thing, but to an aggregate of ownership designed to eliminate the differences that particular conditions of possession can make (whether flood or default),” explains Martin. “Property becomes a general or abstract category when the distinction between the personal and commercial is blurred” (141). In this situation, the disjunctive synthesis breaks down; possession and ownership no longer exist in a relation of productive tension with one another. That this tension has historically been ‘productive’ is worth stressing.

Teresa Brennan argues that the modern ego has largely succeeded in making over the world in its own image by projecting this inner disorder as an external threat to be mastered.⁴⁷ In her view, the ‘equilibrium’ of the disjunctive synthesis is a fantasy—albeit

⁴⁶ To the point that the terms function as synonyms for one another in MacPherson’s study.

⁴⁷ “If so far this totalizing process has canvassed at least four centuries, it has not yet reached a natural limit” (*History after Lacan* 3).

one that “has a physical force in history” (28)—since it can only be maintained at the expense of permanent expansion, the paranoid projection of the ego. Possessive individualism, in other words, is permanently unbalanced and, recalling Newman, inherently inflationary. This tendency is exacerbated by financialization, which abolishes spatial limits and temporal constraints but succeeds in replacing the frontier with a “smooth” world. Impervious and impenetrable, the smooth world frustrates precisely the sort of objectifying projection characteristic of the modern (liberal) ego. Lacking a coherent strategy for the externalization of antagonism by projecting it outwards—what David Harvey calls “the spatial fix”—possessive individualism is subject to increasing volatility. Just like the neoliberal order itself, the individual possessed is plagued by disorder, spontaneous eruptions, irrational outbursts and an atmosphere of constant crisis—and because of this constancy, an atmosphere where crisis becomes routine, an everyday apocalypse. “I wonder if we’re depressed because there’s no frontier anymore. Because we can’t pretend anymore there’s a place no one’s been. I wonder if aggregate depression is on the rise, worldwide,” one character muses in Franzen’s *The Corrections* (330).

Under neoliberalism, then, possessive individualism doesn’t mean quite what it used to. The old standard of possession is dissolved by liquidity as ownership disappears into a transactional blur. Even as ownership was celebrated during the red-hot stock market of the late 1990s (“shareholder democracy,” “ownership society”), the qualities associated with it—autonomy, control, self-possession—were less and less in evidence. Individuals in this spectral economy, in turn, seem simply possessed, not self-possessed.

Instead, agency in the “new economy” shifted from shareholders to managers and even (seemingly) to the market itself. Ownership has both intensified and become unrecognizable as the possessive individual is transcended by new forms of identity—securitized selves and leveraged personalities—that must come to an accommodation with the fact that in an increasingly complex economy, agency lies elsewhere; that agency has become, as Timothy Melley suggests, structural (5). Deprived of its central rhetorical trope (‘possession’) possessive individualism falters as a convincing model of neoliberal selfhood. “What it means to own something, just like what it means to be possessed of oneself, undergoes significant modulation under financialization,” Randy Martin explains. “The securitization of consumer debt, the bundling of individual bills into bonds that can be traded in specialized markets, spreads ownership around in vexing ways” (20). Accordingly, the neoliberal era generates new models of selfhood, ones that “come tumbling out of financial markets. The shareholder and stakeholder are meant not only to infuse capitalism with its needed life blood, but to orient people as to how to live through the market” (Martin 117)

Living through the market

Under classical liberalism, possessive individualism proceeded from the understanding that as one’s own proprietor, what can be “sold” is one’s labour. The rhetoric of ownership presumes that whatever can be “possessed” is thus also alienable. Labour, though, was only the opening salvo in the rationalization of the body. Today, this sense of ownership has been heightened to the point that the body itself—beyond its

capacity for work—is seen in terms of disarticulable and thus alienable parts.⁴⁸ From blood banks to fertility clinics to the patenting of genetic information and beyond, the spectre of a fully rationalized body haunts us. Our anxiety, though, is held at bay by the language we use to describe this process: “donor” surreptitiously evokes and evades the body’s implication within the reigning logic of capitalist exchange by framing many of these economic transactions in terms of “gifts,” whether in terms of organs, reproductive capacity, etc. So even as the concept of ownership intensifies, encouraging an attitude of radical self-objectivity towards one’s own body, the rhetoric of donorship helps to maintain the corporeal integrity of the possessive individual (or at least its semblance) by designating portions of it, if not inalienable, then at least unmarketable. It is an idiom, though, that is increasingly out of step with the market basis of many of these transactions. The body is far from the only site of renewed economic exploitation of subjective experience under neoliberalism. In fact, experience itself is recast as “human capital” which quantifies an individual’s unique combination of education, skills, and training, making the self into a portfolio (Martin 187). And beyond the rationalization of the individual, the culture at large was increasingly invested in the fate of the financial markets.

During the Roaring Nineties, business culture was not only embraced by the popular culture of the period, it was the popular culture. Stock tips replaced the weather as the topic of casual conversation and a spate of new cable channels (e.g. MSNBC,

⁴⁸ One of *Fight Club*’s more memorable conceits is the way the anonymous narrator constantly refers to himself as an organ in the first person: “I am Joe’s prostate”; “I am Joe’s gallbladder” (58). This both distracts from and draws attention to the narrator’s disassociative mental state, typical of the author’s strategies of disavowal.

CNNfn) imprinted the aesthetic of the stock ticker on the decade as vividly as MTV marked the one previous.⁴⁹ More and more Americans were participating in the market. “By the end of the 1990s, half of all American families owned stock (up from 10 per cent in 1960, with most of the rise occurring after 1980,” explains Steve Fraser. “At the end of the 1990s, well over a quarter of all wealth was held in the form of stock, more than any other single asset. More was invested in institutional funds between 1991 and 1994 than in all the years since 1939” (583). While the notion that the stock market is inherently democratizing and that as a result America was on its way to becoming a shareholder nation or ownership society was overblown,⁵⁰ there is no denying that the common person increasingly felt like their fortunes were tied to that of the market as a whole. This subjective impression may have been generated by the market’s growing visibility within the popular culture of the time, but it lags behind actual transformations in the economy, namely the financialization of retirement savings (“grey” capital) and home ownership (mortgage-backed securities).

Widespread exposure to the market began in earnest in the 1950s as companies like General Motors established pension funds for their workers, reinvesting at least half the money collected into their own stocks. “Workers thus would gain, at least in theory, a stake in the prosperity of their company, building loyalty to management while also providing companies with a captive source of credit—their own workforce. All that new

⁴⁹ The ticker aesthetic has merged seamlessly with the delivery of the news. Most news channels now feature “the crawl”—scrolling text at the bottom of the screen that provides live updates and a counterpoint to the images above it. The ticker aesthetic also informs DeLillo’s sensibility (or is it Eric’s?). From the opening lines of *Cosmopolis*: “He did not take long walks into the scrolling dawn” (5).

⁵⁰ Doug Henwood points out that while stock ownership jumped during the 1990s, the concentration of wealth increasingly pooled at the upper end of the scale. Using figures from a 1998 U.S. Federal Reserve study, Henwood concludes that “the richest 1% of stockholders own over half the stock held by individuals; the bottom 80%, under 2%” (124).

cash contributed to the bull market of the 1950s,” concludes economist Michael Hudson (37). This proved to be a risky proposition, though, as some companies went bankrupt and in the process wiped out the captive retirement savings of its employees. These days, pension fund managers seek to diversify their holdings by investing in mutual funds rather than the stock of any one company. The result, suggests Hudson, is that “worker’s fortunes are now tied not just to their own companies but to the market as a whole” (37). The infusion of grey capital that helped prolong the post-war boom is only one example of the way that the market depends on new sources of capital to fuel its expansion. Another came in 1981 when Congress deregulated the Savings and Loan industry, accelerating the securitization of mortgages (Taylor 165). This bundled together home loans, individually too small to be worth trading, into a special class of bonds: mortgage-backed securities. Along with the appetite for grey capital, it meant that the areas of economic life not popularly associated with Wall Street (retirement planning and home ownership) were increasingly coming under the sway of the financial markets.

Walter Kirn illustrates in personal terms what it means to “live through the market.” Kirn, contributing to a special issue of the *New York Times Magazine* on debt, writes about receiving a mortgage from a locally-owned bank after being turned down by larger lenders suspicious of his fluctuating income (as a self-employed writer). After Larry, his banker, asks him to look around at the “schoolteachers and nurses” standing in line, Kirn is told that his loan is coming from them, not some institution. Instead of an abstract formula applied anonymously, “Larry had looked in my soul and deemed me creditworthy.” Exultant at receiving his loan (less a “rational business decision” on the

part of the bank than “an act of grace”), Kirn finds himself emotionally invested in repayment. This monthly ritual is no simple financial arrangement. Kirn hand-delivers his cheques, nodding at Larry in a monthly reaffirmation that the bank’s faith, not to mention its money, is well-placed. In short order, however, the small-town bank is sold, Larry is let go, and Kirn is directed to send his payments to the out-of-state bank that now owns his mortgage. Struck by a “thunderous revelation,” Kirn realizes that “my debts are other people’s assets!”

“My commitment to do right by Larry was, in fact, an investment or instrument that could be traded on the market. Meaning, it seemed to me, that I could be traded on the market. And I had been,” he muses. “My promise was now a part of a portfolio, not unlike a Houston municipal bond, and belonged to people I didn't know.” As his personal bond with Larry is securitized and turned into a tradable bond, Kirn is left feeling strangely unnerved. He knows he shouldn’t be, of course; that this is the modern way of doing business, Larry is an “anachronism,” and his own understanding of the process similarly outdated. Citing his “19th century belief that all debts are debts to individuals toward whom the debtor should feel thankful,” Kirn struggles to come to grips with the abrupt depersonalization of what was for him a richly felt experience and expression of a sturdy social relation. “I may still have owed hundreds of thousands of dollars to people, but whoever they were, I no longer owed them love,” he concludes.

Framing his experience as the education of a financial naïf, Kirn implicitly contrasts his account of innocence lost with the presumably jaded perspective of “mature, sophisticated adults with credit cards and houses,” whom he assumes are completely

unfazed by the financialization of everyday life. In part, he's right to do so—his own experience notwithstanding, in the wake of the savings and loan collapse of the late 1980s and resulting wave of consolidation, it is far more likely that one's mortgage will be held by a large financial institution than a community thrift. Just because not everyone has a Larry to put a friendly face on an impersonal process, though, doesn't mean that Kirn's experience is as atypical as he presents it. His exaggerated sense of his own financial naivete obscures the fact that for a culture where possessive individualism still powerfully informs selfhood, the attenuation of ownership feels unnatural, even to Wall Street veterans.⁵¹

What is left unsettled in Kirn's account is the nature of his relationship with the now faceless owners of his debt. If not "love," then what? Timothy Melley might answer: paranoia, anxiety, and dread. In *Empire of Conspiracy: Paranoia in Postwar America*, Melley offers a compelling account of the challenges posed to possessive individualism by the fact that "people are no longer what they used to be" (38). Agency in the post-1945 era, he argues, appears to have shifted from the individual to anonymous and impersonal systems (the mass media, vast bureaucracies and sprawling corporations; Eisenhower's warning about the "military-industrial complex" is one example). What Melley calls agency panic, "begins with this discovery of social controls that cannot be reconciled with a liberal view of individuals as wholly autonomous and rational

⁵¹ "A line which would never be crossed could be drawn down the center of the market. On one side would be the homeowner; on the other, investors and traders. These two groups would never meet; *this is curious in view of how personal it seems to lend a fellow man the money to buy his home*," Michael Lewis explains in *Liar's Poker*, his famous account of working at the Saloman Brother's bond desk, epicentre of the financial frenzy on Wall Street during the mid-to-late 1980s. "The homeowner would see only his local savings and loan manager, from whom the money came and to whom it was, over time, returned. Investors and traders would see paper" (85-86, italics mine). I should note that the line that Lewis refers to is nothing other than *the market itself*.

entities” (14). Since agency—the privileged “property” of possessive individualism—is so basic to our understanding of the self, this new state of affairs generates a great deal of confusion. How exactly should one attribute agency to corporations, for example, without anthropomorphizing their decision-making process (a quandary exacerbated in this particular instance by the corporation’s legal status as a person)? The problem, as Peter Knight puts it, “how there can be control without a controller?” (216). Baffled by their vast scale and opacity (one being the function of the other) panicked individuals tend to attribute to systems the human quality of intention, as if the outcomes of complex systems can be understood in terms of “a single consciousness or monolithic will” (13). Melley calls this category confusion an instance of postmodern transference: the attribution of psychological motivation to sociological processes. Once we frame the diffuse causality of complex systems in human terms, “they” appear to exercise the agency that rightfully belongs to “us.” Because “the assumptions of possessive individualism encourage an all-or-nothing concept of agency,” the rise of systems can mean only the eclipse of the self (Melley 13).

Agency panic thus reveals the way social communications affect individual identity and agency, but it also disavows this revelation. It begins with a radical insight, yet it is a fundamentally conservative response—“conservative” in the sense that it conserves a traditional model of the self in spite of the obvious challenges that postwar technologies of communication and social organization pose to that model. Its widespread appearance on the postwar landscape indicates a broad cultural refusal to modify a concept of the self that is no longer wholly accurate or useful, but that still underpins a long-standing national fantasy of subjectivity. (Melley 14-15)

Melley’s thoughtful analysis does a great deal to explain the complex dynamic of post-war paranoia. But, as Michael Wood points out, we live in a post-paranoid age. Wood’s

observation comes in his review of *Underworld*, Don DeLillo's sprawling counterhistory of the Cold War. In it, DeLillo—one of the prime exponents of a paranoid style of American prose, along with Thomas Pynchon —“explores conspiracy's legacy or, more precisely, a world bereft of conspiracy, in mourning for the scary, constricting sense the old secrets used to make.” Paranoia, reflects one of the characters from *Underworld*, depended on the sense of “some deeper meaning that existed solely to keep him from knowing what it was” (421). In the post-paranoid age, the opposition of surface and depth so essential to the conspiracy no longer holds up. “All the banned words, the secrets kept in white-washed vaults, the half-forgotten plots—they're all out here now, seeping invisibly into the land and the air, into the marrowed folds of the bone” (*Underworld* 802-3). Secrets are replaced by the white noise of the information society where everything is present, nothing is hidden, and yet much goes unnoticed, lost amidst the “blur and glut” (DeLillo, “Silhouette City” 352). Oddly, though, we mourn their passing.

Secrets are a necessary component of the strong(ly defended) sense of self presumed by agency panic and secrecy its privileged discourse.⁵² In opening up or hallucinating a gap between the subject and the abstract impersonal processes—the deeper meaning that, by definition, always lies elsewhere—the paranoid secret defends against the realization that the borders between self and systems are dissolving.

Underworld is in its own way nostalgic for a time when secrets mattered in a way they no longer do today. But it is hardly conservative because even though it is a story about how

⁵² “We can in fact hypothesize that paranoia is a defense of—perhaps even a component of—liberal individualism” (Melley 25).

the protagonist, the rigidly self-made Nick Shay unearths the long-buried secrets of his making, his quest is not paranoid or conspiratorial but elegiac. Nick is letting his secrets go—by divulging them he dispels the power they once held over him. The novel’s structure enacts as well as portrays how one learns to live without the organizing, motivating, spectral presence of secrets—its narrative unity is assembled through making connections, not impelled by absent causes. Ultimately what makes *Underworld* post-paranoid is that it abandons secrecy—the hysterical discourse of agency panic—in favour of an everyday openness, epitomized by the technological miracle of the web, “where everybody is everywhere at once” (808). *Underworld* celebrates the very state of being connected that previously would have inspired a wave of revulsion and dread since, according to the zero-sum logic of agency panic, it intrudes into the autonomous, self-contained individual. Trading in clenching paranoia for the ecstatic abandon of what Patrick O’Donnell calls a “digital apotheosis” (158), DeLillo explores the very limits of agency panic, but paradoxically he does so by ranging to the opposite extreme. “One senses that DeLillo is an all-or-nothing writer. If the future doesn’t belong to the fully autonomous self, the author, then it will have to belong to the crowds,” Mark Edmundson writes.⁵³ “In fact, I take DeLillo to be in many ways nostalgic for the strong sense of self-identity whose demise he’s busy chronicling” (122-23). For this reason, Edmundson suggests, DeLillo is unresponsive to the possibility that there are options between the

⁵³ Edmundson’s supposition is confirmed by the author himself. In an interview with Maria Nadotti, DeLillo offers this:

The [individual’s need to abandon oneself in the multitude] is not only to abandon responsibility, but to abandon one’s self, to escape the weight of being and to exist within a collective chorus—to lose not only one’s own identity but one’s own language, to be in the midst of a million people who are screaming the same word, always the same word forever. For some it amounts to a sort of ecstasy (Nadotti 113).

fanatically defended, rigidly defined self of agency panic and its polar opposite, envisioned in *Underworld* as the fluid, unbounded, online self, existing entirely in its connections to others. The author, in other words, has been indelibly marked by a strong concept of the self—possessive individualism. While he is preternaturally sensitive to the challenges posed to it in the post-war order, he cannot really imagine how one might be otherwise. *Underworld* celebrates the Internet as a kind of soft annihilation, an intense, transcendent communion that, however miraculous, still figures agency as something to be dissolved. What has changed, then, is not really the concept of agency (that most fundamental of “properties”) but the attitude one holds towards the prospect of its dissolution (from panic to panegyric).⁵⁴ In its final pages, then, *Underworld* gestures toward the possibility of selfhood free from agency panic, a type of networked subjectivity appropriate to the post-paranoid age, but it cannot quite see past the bright moment of ecstatic surrender, of rapture.

⁵⁴ In his reading of *Underworld*, Jesse Kavadlo points to the “overall lack of grammatical agency: the book is filled with sentence fragments (lacking subjects more often than verbs), the “to be” verb, expressed as an agentless “this is” construction, and the use of “you” in order to obscure—or at least complicate—the agency of the sentence. Through DeLillo’s very grammar, forces seem at work beyond people’s control and, as a result, the characters in the novel look for something more, something larger.” (113)

CHAPTER ONE

Homecoming at Camden College: An American Psycho Returns to his Alma Mater

“A deep need makes for a superficial grasp.”

— Bertolt Brecht

“With an evening coat and a white tie... even a stockbroker can gain a reputation for being civilized.”

— Oscar Wilde

“A ‘reified’ society is one from which meaning has vanished, or in which meaningful statements become impossible.”

— Timothy Bewes

“Claustrophobia, at its most extreme, is not caused by overcrowding, but by lack of any continuity existing between one action and the next that is close enough to be touching it. It is this which is hell. The culture in which we live is perhaps the most claustrophobic that has every existed; in the culture of globalization... there is no glimpse of an elsewhere or an otherwise. The given is a prison. And faced with such reductionism, human intelligence is reduced to greed.”

— John Berger

ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE provides *American Psycho* with a properly Dantean beginning. From the very first words, the reader is advised that what superficially appears to be a quasi-anthropological portrait of the New York plutocracy—“socialite realism” in Mim Udovitch’s wonderful phrase—is at the same time a descent into hell. Told from the perspective of Patrick Bateman—Wall Street scion, expert in the minutiae of *GQ*-codified dress and conduct, rapist, killer, cannibal; in every sense of the word, *consumer*—Ellis’s 1991 novel satirizes the greed and excess of the 1980s through the depredations of its central character. Patrick belongs to that class of society that Tom Wolfe described, not unseriously, as “the masters of the universe” (1987). He is powerful, beautiful, pedigreed. He is also a monster. “I’m into, oh, murders and executions mostly. It depends,” he tells a date (206). We tag along as

Patrick eats, shops, fucks and kills with equal facility and enjoyment—or more precisely, with a notable lack of enjoyment; every act is motivated by a profound anxiety, a “nameless dread” at what lies beneath his increasingly desperate and pointless activity. Indeed, what is perhaps most horrifying about Patrick is not the brutality of his actions but the suggestion that he receives no pleasure from them at all, not even the perverse thrill of transgression in the act of killing because, in his enjoyment of total privilege (‘master of the universe’), there are no boundaries left to breach, no barriers left to cross.

To invoke F. Scott Fitzgerald, *American Psycho* is the story of the beautiful *and* damned. It is a hellish text because it posits a completely immanent world, a closed system, where the possibility of an elsewhere or otherwise is unimaginable. As Norman Mailer describes it, “Bateman is living in a hell where no hell is external to ourselves and so all of existence is hell” (158). The stifling atmosphere, though, is hardly prisonlike.¹ On the contrary, Patrick glides effortlessly through a world that seems composed entirely of commodities as if it were second nature to him. Yet, the semblance of unrestrained freedom afforded by Patrick’s limitless purchasing power is not the consumerist idyll that it first appears. Wandering through a video store in search of some entertainment, for example, Patrick is seized by one of his many anxiety attacks: “*There are too many fucking videos to choose from.*” Gripped by existential panic, he manages his crisis through a strategy that becomes all too familiar over the course of the narrative: “Then, almost by rote, as if I’ve been programmed, I reach for *Body Double*—a movie I have rented thirty-seven times” (112). This parody of consumer choice—Patrick prefers the

¹ Ruth Helyer offers a suggestive reading of *American Psycho* as an update of the Gothic literary tradition precisely because of its claustrophobic effect.

eternal repetition of the same—is one of any number of moments within *American Psycho* where the bars of his gilded cage come into focus. In Patrick’s world, necessity is manifested as the imperative *to choose*. What at first appears to be the very seat of his agency—his cultured sensibility, his *taste*—stands revealed as compulsion, a voracious appetite that cannot be sated. Consumption is not merely an expression of Patrick’s class privilege, aesthetic sensibility, or the mechanism by which minute differences in a byzantine (and intensely competitive) system of status are generated. Rather, it is the only activity that can distract Patrick from the inevitable truth that he is nothing more than a slave to choice, an automaton of desire. “Patrick cannot claim to be alienated because of the plain fact that there is no outside beyond his smooth surface world, no elsewhere he could be alienated from,” notes Martin Weinrich (77).

Ellis’s novel, however, has not been widely read as a meditation on the identity of freedom and necessity in no small part because of its consumerist backdrop. As Norman Mailer rather grandly declares: “it was hard not to bellow with fury at the monotony of the language. We are being asphyxiated with state-of-the-art commodities” (158). Mailer’s observation, however overstated, does get to the heart of Ellis’s representational strategy, which consists of Patrick’s fastidious awareness of the commodities that make up his surroundings. By endlessly stressing brand names and designer labels Ellis achieves an entirely contradictory effect. On the one hand, he clearly evokes a specific place and time. Along with his uncanny ear for dialogue (however banal) and relentless, unflinching documentary-style approach, the verisimilitude of the novel’s setting established by its constant citation of commodities lends credence to reading *American*

Psycho as a chronicle of the lifestyles of New York's rich and fatuous, circa 1987. On the other hand, the realism of this account is constantly undermined by the very element that is supposed to guarantee its authenticity—the commodity-strewn setting. Characters, for example, are given almost no physical description because, as Patrick assures us, *everyone* in his circle is beautiful. Instead, they are introduced sartorially: "Price is wearing a six-button wool and silk suit by Ermenegildo Zegna, a cotton shirt with French cuffs by Ike Behar, a Ralph Lauren silk tie and leather wing tips by Fratelli Rossetti" (4). Patrick is similarly attentive to conveying his own state of dress: "I'm wearing a lightweight linen suit with pleated trousers, a cotton shirt, a dotted silk tie, all by Valentino Couture, and perforated cap-toe leather shoes by Allen-Edmonds" (31). The only physical descriptions offered are those that tend to reinforce the homogeneity of Patrick's circle. To paraphrase his girlfriend Evelyn (after Patrick asks her why she doesn't just go for one of his friends), *everyone* is rich, good looking and has a great body (23). And each character is strangely characterless, empty of individual content. Not only are Patrick's peers vapid and shallow, they are all vapid and shallow in *exactly the same way*. There is very little to distinguish them from one another, causing untold problems for the attentive reader and significantly, for Patrick himself. One of the novel's darkly funny conceits is that the characters routinely fail to recognize one another, in no small part because a change of clothes is enough to dispel the veneer of familiarity.

Accordingly, I argue that *American Psycho* subverts our expectations of traditional narrative development by refusing to maintain the distinction between foreground (interactions between characters, the traditional level of plot) and background (in this

case, the commodities or “wallpaper” that establish setting). In effect, the author has created a self-consuming narrative, one that cannibalizes the very structure that gives it coherence in an endless process of fragmentation and refashioning. What results is a feeling of vertigo as Ellis collapses what should be distinct narrative levels (plot, character and setting) onto a single axis.

While commodities are the *sine qua non* of Patrick’s world, critics of *American Psycho* have tended to dismiss their ubiquity as an all-too-obvious device, one that undermines the novel’s satiric bite through the author’s indulgence of a flawed—or at least over-utilized—strategy. What makes this a flawed strategy is that it is excessive and thus *boring*; Ellis’s readers plead for relief, arguing that the text is, if nothing else, *too long*, the narrative buried under the crushing weight of the detritus of contemporary consumer society. Jonathan Yardley describes this as Ellis’s “strategy of desperation, since he has nothing to say, he fills his pages with familiar brand names and inane chatter” (B3). The obsessive cataloguing of pop culture ephemera that makes up a large portion of *American Psycho* leaves the novel open to the charge that it is just as superficial, shallow and trite as its ostensible subject. The *Wall Street Journal*’s Roger Kimball suggests that “it counts as an incident in the annals of contemporary American publicity, not American literature” (7) while *The New York Times*’ Caryn James writes that “to read *American Psycho* is to feel like the victim of a public relations con job” (1). Indeed, most critics share an ambivalent attitude towards the text: is it criticism or affirmation, diagnostic or the disease itself? Some—like Yardley—see this as a sign that the author has effectively been ventriloquized by his material. Others argue that the

formal confusion between foreground and background hints at a perspectival abyss (or moral void, if you like) within the author himself, who is accused of identifying far too closely with the object of his critique.² For the most part, this is nothing more than an *ad hominem* attack leveled against a difficult and controversial writer—which is not to deny the grain of truth in the charge. *American Psycho* has prompted no small amount of consternation among its readers because its claustrophobic narrative forces the reader into a position of intensely uncomfortable intimacy with a truly monstrous character. Bereft of an alternate perspective to identify with and frustrated by Ellis’s refusal of narrative closure, it is easy to see how some readers have been quick to dismiss the author as monstrous himself. Because a satisfactory resolution or alternative perspective to Patrick’s both go unrealized within the text, it is not immediately clear how Ellis manages to achieve any sort of detachment from his creation, *though it is taken for granted that he does*. “Despite the lack of ironic distance between his own voice and that of his psychopathic narrator, Mr. Ellis clearly does not want or expect the reader to identify with Patrick Bateman” (Lehman-Haupt C18). Are Ellis’s intentions so *obvious*? Without being told directly, how do we divine them? Sidestepping the mire of intentional fallacy entirely, I will argue that without recourse to plot or character, Ellis’s novel is intelligible only by way of reference to its carefully composed *setting*.

Accordingly, this essay provides a close reading of *American Psycho* in order to elaborate on the formal strategies Ellis uses to create distance within the narrative, evading Patrick’s otherwise smothering perspective. The whole point of Ellis’s

² “Ellis, of course, is not actually Bateman, but on the back cover of *American Psycho* the author’s photograph is posed and lighted quite like ‘Bateman’s’ on the front, and it’s next to a boldface resume of [Bateman], not the author” (Plagens 59). See also Bowman, Coates.

unrelenting formalism in *American Psycho* is to render identification with its narrator impossible, not simply because he is unreliable (though he is, odiously so) but since the narrative itself is unverifiable as a whole. Simply put, there is no single position within this text from which one can make sense of it. What consistency there is to be found comes from elsewhere, from bits of commodity flotsam and media jetsam, from the shape of the narrative itself. In what follows, I focus on four elements in particular as indicative of what Julian Murphet calls Ellis's "organizing presence" (18). The first two—the many references to *Les Misérables* and *The Patty Winters Show*—are set directly against the white noise of *American Psycho*'s consumerist backdrop. The third, consisting of three chapters celebrating pop music, creates jarring discontinuities with Patrick's account due to their wildly disproportionate tone. Moreover, their placement within the larger narrative carves out an interstitial space that is both part of Patrick's account and, intriguingly, separate from it. The fourth element consists of a vast intertextual apparatus that 'grounds' the otherwise unverifiable *American Psycho* within the 'reality' of Bret Easton Ellis's entire fictional oeuvre. Every one of the author's novels and short stories share a basic intertext: Camden College.³ Providing the setting for Ellis's second novel (*The Rules of Attraction*), Camden's alums populate all of Ellis's fiction. The existence of this fictional network is subtly referenced in *American Psycho*, but it moves to the fore in Ellis's provocative rewriting of *American Psycho* in his most recent novel-cum-memoir, *Lunar Park* (2005). In it, Ellis not only revisits his most infamous work, *he writes himself*

³ This intertextual reference stretches beyond Ellis's work. Camden College also appears in novels by Jonathan Lethem (*The Fortress of Solitude*) and Jill Eisenstadt (*Far Rockaway*), writers who, like Ellis, are graduates of Bennington College. Another Bennington alumnus—Donna Tartt—uses Hampden College as the backdrop for her novel *The Secret History*, an evident homage to Ellis (not coincidentally, the dedicatee of *The Secret History*).

into it. I will address the significance of this seemingly contradictory gesture at the end of the essay. For now, however, I want to address the circumstances of *American Psycho*'s reception in more detail, before going on to discuss how Ellis problematizes the narrative in terms of both character and plot.

Early Responses

The 1991 release of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* will go down as one of the most contentious episodes in the history of American publishing. Ellis's novel, sections of which were leaked to the press in advance of its original publication date, was savaged months before it finally hit a bookstand. Critics were aghast at decontextualized scenes of sexual torture and murder excerpted in *Time* and *Spy* magazines prior to the book's publication, scenes made all the more shocking because they were rendered in clinical and dispassionate terms. The outcry was so ferocious that Richard Snyder, CEO of Ellis's original publisher Simon & Schuster—and reputedly under heavy pressure from its corporate parent Paramount Communications—undercut the editorial board that had approved the book and on November 15, 1990 rejected *American Psycho*. Simon & Schuster forfeited the \$300,000 advance paid to Ellis, not to mention the costs of producing and then shredding pallets of the controversial novel, due to ship within the month. Quickly snapped up by Sonny Mehta of Alfred A. Knopf, *American Psycho* was published in paperback as part of the Vintage Contemporaries series in March of 1991. Ellis, already the subject of near universal scorn for authoring such a “vile” book, faced even more outrage when detractors quickly adduced that by virtue of the advance he

retained from Simon & Schuster, not only would he avoid the financial ruin he seemed so richly to deserve, Ellis was in fact profiting quite handsomely from his own moral bankruptcy. Tammy Bruce, president of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization of Women (NOW), was so incensed with the brutal misogyny of the novel—describing it as “how-to manual for the torture and dismemberment of women”—she called for a boycott of Knopf products for all of 1991.

The frenzy over *American Psycho* has all the stuff of a contemporary (im)morality tale, the sort of story that Tom Wolfe would write (and arguably did in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, an important intertextual reference within *American Psycho* itself).⁴ The avalanche of hype, however, effectively buried the novel under the weight of censure, disapproval and, in very small measure, the slightness of faint praise (most notably from fellow guild members Norman Mailer and Fay Weldon). As a result, critical discussion of *American Psycho* has been more concerned with rehearsing the litany of complaints brought against it and triangulating the positions of its various critics rather than reading the text itself. Accordingly, I want to return to the early debate over the novel—the popular reviews, commentary, essays and interviews that all form part of the paratextual apparatus and unavoidable supplement to the text. A few good reception histories already exist; my intentions here are not to supplant them, nor am I interested in providing a full and exhaustive accounting of popular responses to the text. For that, Rosa Eberly’s recent study of twentieth century censorship controversies surely stands as the authoritative source (citing sixty or so articles pertaining to *American Psycho*), at least in terms of Ellis’s American readership. British responses are analyzed in Elizabeth Young’s close

⁴ Patrick Bateman, for example, works at Pierce & Pierce—the same firm as Sherman McCoy’s in *Bonfire*.

reading of *American Psycho*, which is not only one of the first essays written about the novel (published in 1992) but still among the most insightful. For good or for ill, the flurry of critical responses have so conditioned subsequent readings of *American Psycho* that it is impossible to provide any measured commentary on the text without first taking into account the initial—and overwhelmingly hostile—response to it.

As such, this study owes much to critics like Marco Abel who argues for reading the novel and accompanying controversy as a composite text: “Among the many effects this critical judgment had, *one of the most remarkable was to have established the conditions of possibility for future responses to Ellis’s American Psycho*” (141, italics in the original). Abel is concerned primarily with director Mary Harron’s 2001 film adaptation of *American Psycho*, which was generally well-regarded by film critics for emphasizing the satire of the source material while downplaying what Abel describes as the novel’s “compositional cornerstones”: brutal violence and the sheer boredom which accrues from prolonged exposure to its unceasing repetition of brand names. Abel’s point is not that Harron takes liberties with the novel—she does—but that the liberties she does take were to a degree predetermined by the overwhelming critical response to the text; of necessity, “the film embodies the critical debate that preceded it” (Abel 142). Favorable response to Harron’s film, the declaration that it is “good”, merely reconfirms that Ellis’s novel must be “bad”. As such—and this is key to Abel’s provocative argument—Harron’s film fails to reproduce what was the most interesting, controversial and misunderstood aspect of the original text: “the film focuses on what the book allegedly *means* (a critique of the capitalist excesses of the 1980s) and thus somehow never gets around to

articulating what the book *does*: namely, that it produces readers incapable of responding to the text's affective force" (147, italics mine).

Apropos of Abel, can one read *American Psycho* at all? Early reports would suggest not, precisely because the initial furor over decontextualized scraps precludes any discussion of the narrative as a whole or the function of violence within it. In other words, all subsequent (mis)readings of *American Psycho* are conditioned by the scandal which pre-empted its publication. Those first reviewers who did make it through the entire book tended to frame their experience in terms of passive endurance rather than active engagement. The problem with critics treating *American Psycho* as literature's Augean stables, however, is that instead of critical insight, they bring little more to the text than a mop. Novelist Fay Weldon, who praises Ellis's daring and Nietzschean willingness to flout both moral and narrative conventions, ends her discussion on this remarkable note: "Look, I don't want you to actually read Ellis's book. I did it for you." Contrary to Weldon's injunction—*not* to read *American Psycho*—I propose that the novel can be most productively read *through* this very resistance. It stands to reason, though, that I first establish the terms of this debate. Early critical response to *American Psycho* can be divided into two relatively distinct stages: anxiety over the social consequences of such a book and questions about its aesthetic value and the function of art in general. As Carol Iannone notes, "there was some confusion among Ellis's critics about whether his book was offensive on moral or aesthetic grounds. Half the time it was denounced for what was in it, the other half for how badly it was done" (52).

In the case of the former, the prepublication leaks of the novel's most violent passages invited a similarly out-of-context response, such as Roger Rosenblatt's unequivocal demand: "Snuff This Book!" Rosenblatt's was but one in a series of simplistic and literal readings agonizing over the possibility that by depicting such brutality without any overt condemnation, Ellis was at best normalizing psychopathic conduct, if not actively encouraging it. Carla Freccero best sums up this position as one where "representation is construed as advocacy, and figuration is construed as performativity" (50). Among those who immediately condemned it as a "sick" book, *American Psycho* is seen to partake in the same sort of misogyny and violence that it depicts. This position assumes the text unproblematically reflects reality and furthermore, that reality will potentially reflect it, in the form of copycat killings and increased levels of violence against women. *American Psycho* is treated as a perverse documentary or exhortatory instance of hateful agitprop which fails to acknowledge that *as a fictional representation of reality*, Ellis's novel utilizes a variety of mediating aesthetic strategies (e.g. unreliable narration).

Three examples should suffice to demonstrate the disturbing literalism that afflicted Ellis's scandalized readers. It seems appropriate to begin with Rosenblatt, whose opinion piece in the *New York Times* appeared months before *American Psycho* hit the shelves. Rosenblatt's general drift suggests that Ellis's "moronic and sadistic" novel is the product of a "lame and unhealthy imagination" (3). Rosenblatt treats Ellis as a disturbed young man ill-served by the greedy and unscrupulous publishing industry, particularly "the folks at Vintage [who] seem to me to be the special scoundrels of our tale, whether

they are being cynical and avaricious or merely tasteless and violent” (16). The patronizing tone from America’s newspaper of record could very well come with the territory, but in other outlets, condescension quickly turns to condemnation. Jonathan Yardley, writing in *The Washington Post*, is even more vehement, calling *American Psycho* “pure trash... a dirty book by a dirty writer” (3). Yardley even goes so far as to suggest that in scripting the depredations of Patrick Bateman, Ellis is giving vent to his own obscene desires: “All of these encounters are described in thoroughly gratuitous detail and with what gives every evidence of being a fair amount of relish; Ellis seems to have enjoyed his labors every bit as much as Bateman does his murders, decapitations, disembowelments and other amusements” (3).⁵ Finally, in a letter written to Random House (corporate parent to Vintage), Gloria Steinem suggested the Ellis should take responsibility in the event that any woman was tortured and murdered in a fashion described in his book (Eberly 105, Young 86).⁶ Steinem’s intervention is the most intriguing since it takes place against the backdrop of an unlikely coalition of cultural conservatives and feminists allied against pornography, demonstrating that the *affaire*

⁵ In a similar vein, Norman Mailer intones: “No reader ever forgives a writer who uses him for therapy” (220).

⁶ In a curious twist, Steinem married David Bale in September of 2000. Bale is the father of Christian Bale, the actor who starred in Mary Harron’s adaption of *American Psycho*. Gloria Steinem, in other words, is now Patrick Bateman’s stepmother.

d'Ellis is not simply a matter of literature or even publicity, but one of the signal engagements in what have come to be known as the culture wars⁷.

Missing in these denunciations, of course, is any substantial discussion of the book itself. Instead, we are left with little more than a fixation on Ellis, one that is almost invariably hostile. The novel's publicity tour, for example, was shelved after Ellis received a number of death threats. Even a favourable—if insipid—response from scholars eager to study *American Psycho* offers little more than a warmed-over theory of authorial intention to explain away the text's spectacular excesses—“Understanding that Ellis hates our culture, but not us, is the key to understanding and appreciating his work” (Juchartz and Hunter 12). The implication here could not be more clear: the author is to be held accountable for his creation. The exigencies of post-structuralist theory are summarily dealt with; the author may very well be dead, but he's still morally—if not legally—culpable. In her review of *American Psycho* for *The Nation*, Pagan Kennedy complicates this discussion by suggesting that the fixation on Ellis has more to do with his celebrity status than with the simple fact of authorship: “members of the very same literary and critical establishment now struggling so hard to disown Ellis are the ones who anointed him the new F. Scott Fitzgerald a half-dozen years ago” (427). In other words,

⁷ Pitting ascendant neoconservative ideology—free markets and family values—against unruly liberal identity politics, the culture wars were exemplified by the 1989 funding controversies at the National Endowment for the Arts over the work of Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe. The culture wars were fought in theatres as varied as the classroom (debates over the canon and its domination by dead white males) and the military (the infamous “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” policy regarding gay soldiers formulated by the Clinton administration). The culture wars raged over issues like abortion that—to liberals, at least—appeared to be settled (legally speaking) a generation before. Even once-solid constituencies became newly contested terrain, as exemplified by the Republican takeover of the Democrats' former electoral stronghold in the South over the course of the 1990s. Above all, the culture wars signaled a profound re-alignment in American politics where self-described conservatives adopt the rhetoric of revolution in their assault on the welfare state and liberals fight a rearguard battle to preserve not only the gains of civil rights and third wave feminism, but the values of the New Deal itself.

the frenzy over Ellis amounts to a condemnation of the institutional imprimatur offered by the New York literary establishment. What is at issue is not so much that such a book was written, but that it was written by a “serious” author who commanded a fair amount of cultural capital.

By lauding Bret Easton Ellis for *Less Than Zero*, the literary establishment provided the jolt of electricity that brought a Frankenstein monster of a book [*American Psycho*] to life. And just as in the horror flicks, the mob, armed with pitchforks and torches, is chasing down the beast—and its presumed alter ego, Ellis—rather than its true creator. (428)

The real villain in this scenario—“its true creator”—is the literary establishment itself, those arbiters of taste who helped Ellis up onto his pedestal in the first place. The hysterical reaction among the congeries of reviewers, essayists, academics and other commentators who make up this establishment (whose unity of opinion is certainly overstated in Kennedy’s *j’accuse*) is not so much about Ellis’s decision to take on a controversial topic, but geared towards effecting a swift and convincing disavowal of the previously favoured son.⁸ Kennedy’s account, then, suggests that the critical renunciation of Ellis was a cynical gesture made in the spirit of careerist plausible deniability rather than any real sense of shock and outrage.

So far I’ve outlined the responses to *American Psycho* that manage quite neatly to sidestep any discussion of the book by deflecting critical attention onto the social consequences of dealing with difficult material and pillorying Ellis himself. This is not the whole story, of course; a number of critics are much more generous to Ellis and *American Psycho* itself by treating it as *text* and not a political football. That said, even

⁸ “If he was going to write such filth, why wasn’t he dead, or underground, or in the ghetto?” is Elizabeth Young’s satirical take on this position (92).

among the more literary-minded reviews, the tone and tenor of debate was largely negative. Here, Ellis's perceived failure is framed in aesthetic terms. The implication is that if handled more capably, the brutal violence and Bateman's sneering misogyny, racism, and class hatred would be to some degree legitimized. This, at any rate, is the argument made by fellow novelist Norman Mailer. In her reception history of the *American Psycho* controversy, Rosa Eberly suggests that Mailer's lengthy review in *Vanity Fair* reoriented the debate from the book's social consequences to its putative aesthetic value, an intervention, however, which strikes a weary note. Conceding that Ellis is not without talent ("How one wishes he were without talent!"), Mailer goes on to argue that *American Psycho* is "simply not written well enough" to justify its difficult subject matter: "I cannot forgive Bret Easton Ellis. If I, in effect, defend the author by treating him at this length, it is because he has forced us to look at intolerable material and so few novels try for that much anymore" (221). While Mailer is eager to stake out a privileged space for "artists" to work with controversial themes without fear of censorship (artists such as himself, it must be noted), he concludes sadly that as "art" *American Psycho* is lacking. Its status as "art" is undermined not so much by its content but by the author's ineptitude, whether willful or through ignorance. "Since we are going to have a monstrous book with a monstrous thesis," Mailer advises, "the author must rise to the occasion by having a murderer with enough inner life for us to apprehend him" (220). Ellis fails to carry out his aesthetic mandate, in Mailer's view, by subjecting his readers to a relentlessly boring style where violence marks the only relief from tedium. The only excuse for such a strategy is to portray a psychologically accurate character who we can

recognize as aberrant or troubled and thus learn something from the exercise. However, as Eberly explains, “*American Psycho* does not tell us anymore about ‘the criminal mind’ than we knew when we began the book” (124).

Mailer’s contention that the reader needs to be able to “apprehend” Bateman is unintentionally revealing. For one of the major complaints about the text—on both moral and aesthetic grounds—is that Bateman is never brought to justice for any of his depravities. Instead, the final scene shows Patrick firmly entrenched in his typical milieu, droning on about business accounts with his cohorts over drinks at their preferred watering-hole, Harry’s. In other words, exactly nothing has changed from the opening pages of the novel; there is no narrative resolution of the contradictions embodied by Bateman, no closure. As the final words in the text state: “This is not an exit” (399). Patrick himself, in a moment of chilling introspection, best articulates the position of the reader who has accompanied him this far: “there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling. There has been no reason to tell you any of this. This confession has meant *nothing*...” (377). Mailer’s distress with this state of affairs is palpable. Surely the grinding repetition of detail, charmless banality of adspeak and torrents of blood must mean *something*. As Christopher Lehman-Haupt insists in his excoriation of *American Psycho*, “you can’t create a meaningless world out of meaninglessness” (18). The problem, of course, is that without the scaffolding of an identifiable narrative trajectory and rounded characters *American Psycho* ruthlessly resists readerly expectations, particularly those that hanker after resolution and, in the case of Patrick specifically, justice. Ellis’s refusal to either

ascribe motive or plumb the psychological depths of the narrator goes unacknowledged by critics like Mailer and Lehman-Haupt for what it really is—a bravura literary strategy. To return to Abel’s useful formulation, I argue that it is precisely in these debates over what the novel *means* that we are able to witness what it *does*, namely, produce ambivalent readers whose overt anxiety about the text’s content (i.e. that it is violent and boring) *is actually an incoherent response to its form*.

Dissecting Anatomy: *American Psycho* as Menippean Satire

What, then, is the *form* of *American Psycho*? As a novel it projects a number of conflicting signals about its generic identity. The confusion stems from Ellis’s refusal of specific narrative conventions that would allow the strictures of form to recuperate the abhorrent content. *American Psycho* not only resembles a psychological thriller or police procedural, in it, the author pioneers the metrosexual shopping-and-fucking novel, not to mention crafting a black comedy of (very bad) manners.⁹ Self-consciously playing on the edges of genre fiction, *American Psycho* constantly builds up and then subverts readerly expectations by resisting the very codes that are supposed to grant it coherence and intelligibility. The lurid title and subject matter, for example, suggest that the novel be read as latter-day pulp fiction, with an important proviso. “Pulp” referred to the low-quality paper stock on which the stories were printed—a far cry from *American Psycho*’s release as a trade paperback in the well-respected Vintage Contemporaries series. While

⁹ With its pages and pages of sartorial description and obsessive interest in gadgets and other forms of cultural minutiae, *American Psycho* would appear to borrow its narrative framework from fashion magazines like Patrick’s bible, *GQ*. Interestingly, Chuck Palahniuk—the focus of the next chapter—suggests that his novels are similarly inspired. See his comments in the Interview (Appendix 396).

the novel invokes a pulp sensibility, it does so within a mass product—the trade paperback—that implicitly contradicts the genealogy it attempts to establish. Contrary to the cheap, disposable pulps (and their descendents, the grocery check-out tabloids), *American Psycho* is encased within a commodity form that attests to its value, both in terms of the literary sanction provided by Vintage and in terms of its relatively high cover price. The book itself—the physical thing—encapsulates the fundamental tension between Ellis’s citation of earlier forms and the material context in which they are embedded.

Gathering together all of these elements, Ellis has come up with an unlikely assemblage, one that frustrates because of its simultaneous invocation of and disdain for genre conventions. The literary critic Northrop Frye has categorized such works as Menippean satire or as anatomies, a term I borrow under advisement because Ellis’s protagonist puts its main connotation—analysis or *dissection*—into practice literally, not metaphorically, inscribing it on the bodies of his victims. Anatomies are those sprawling, encyclopedic works whose internal structure often goes unrecognized because it fails to conform to the paradigmatic forms of the day. “It is the anatomy in particular that has baffled critic and there is hardly any fiction writer deeply influenced by it who has not been accused of disorderly conduct,” Frye suggests (313). He goes on to offer James Joyce as the exemplar of the form in no small part because of the controversy Joyce courted as for his “subversive” and “obscure” works. Since anatomies such as *Finnegan’s Wake* “are not organized on familiar principles of prose fiction, the impression of shapelessness remains” (Frye 313). Accordingly, I suggest that the vehement response to

American Psycho is prompted in no small part by critics' frustration with a novel that stubbornly refuses to conform to recognizable conventions. That said, Ellis's real transgression runs far deeper than his ludic treatment of genre conventions—his playful invocation and abandonment of the codes of pulp fiction, advertising, etc. Underlying the seemingly random (“shapeless”) juxtaposition of various narrative elements, Ellis is busily at work deconstructing the novel itself as a literary form. Beyond the seemingly slight (and trite) subject matter and studied blankness of his characters, Ellis interrogates how meaning is produced within aesthetic forms, primarily by asking what grants the novel its narrative continuity and coherence in the first place.

Here a brief return to Mailer's appraisal is instructive. His primary complaint is that Ellis's novel ultimately fails because of the limitations of its main character. “The demand is not that Bateman be factual, but that he be *acceptable as fiction*” (220, italics mine). And Patrick, he assures us most emphatically, is not. The conceit that such an obsessively ordinary yuppie could be at the same time “the most demented killer ever to appear in the pages of a serious American novel” strikes Mailer as patently ridiculous because Ellis refuses to posit any relation between the mundane and sensational elements of the text beyond that of contiguity and juxtaposition. There is no causal mechanism to explain how or why Patrick's conduct is so strikingly inconsistent from one page to the next. The psycho, in other words, lacks a psychopathology. In its absence, there is only the numbing uniformity of tone that transforms murders and dinners out into roughly commensurable experiences. Commenting on these murders, Mailer observes that since they are “not differentiated in their prose from all the other descriptions, an odd aesthetic

terror is on the loose” (159). Mailer conceives of this absent mechanism in terms of the narrator’s profoundly impoverished “inner life” (220). Ellis’s grotesque celebration of the yuppie scene cannot hide the fact that he refuses to probe the hidden depths behind the shimmering play of surfaces. Juxtaposing Patrick’s enthusiasm for the technical features of his new video camera with the snuff film he is in the midst of “directing,” to take but one example, is simply not enough; the boredom, violence and other terrors aesthetic or otherwise the reader must endure can only be justified by excavating the roots of what is clearly pathological behaviour. Barring that, there is no way to make sense of the seemingly senseless, to “learn something we did not know before” (Mailer 159).

Ultimately, what is missing from *American Psycho* is the dimension of psychological depth, a startling omission in a novel explicitly structured around the narrative voice of Patrick Bateman. The paradoxical status of his confession rests upon the formal contradiction that Ellis has bred within the persona of Patrick himself: a first-person narrator who lacks interiority.¹⁰

Critics have responded to this contradiction in a fairly predictable manner. Patrick, explains Elizabeth Young, is “an extremely unreliable narrator” (94). His eponymous psychosis renders the veracity of his account suspect, particularly during those moments in the text when Patrick repeatedly invokes filmic metaphors to express his psychological distance to the events supposedly happening right in front of him, as if it were all happening “in a movie.”¹¹ But while Ellis certainly encourages the reader to question

¹⁰ Reading *American Psycho* alongside Dennis Cooper’s *Frisk*, Mark Storey suggests that the identity that is in crisis is a particularly masculine one.

¹¹ “This is my reality. Everything outside of this is like some movie I once saw” (345).

Patrick's version of events, he refuses to provide an alternative perspective within the text, a basis from which the reader can "reality-test" and verify the narrative. The problem is that every other character in the novel appears equally delusional, a matter I shall discuss in some detail below. That Patrick's is a shared psychosis is surely Ellis's point, a none-too-subtle critique of yuppie striving as capitalist psychopathology. But in terms of the narrative itself, it leaves the reader at a loss. Since there is no perspective within the text that can be productively counterpoised to Patrick's dominant account, the claim that Patrick is an unreliable narrator is somewhat beside the point. The narrative itself is subjectively unverifiable as a whole. The absence of psychological realism is even more striking when contrasted with Ellis's painstaking efforts to evoke a very exact sense of time and place—Manhattan consumer culture of the late 1980s—through a highly detailed and richly textured setting. In pursuit of descriptive realism, Ellis seems to have forgotten about his characters entirely. This, at any rate, is the accusation leveled by Mailer. In contrast, I suggest that Ellis's banishment of "inner life" from the novel is precisely its point. *American Psycho* is, above all, a meditation on the effects of late capitalism on subjectivity.

This is a crucial point because it reveals the high stakes of Ellis's formal experimentation. As a literary form, the novel is inextricable from the perceiving consciousness that provides it with not only its rationale but also its very structure. In his landmark study *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), Ian Watt traces the emergence of the novel back to the early eighteenth century and suggests that it appears at a key moment in the unfolding of modernity: the birth of the modern individual. During this period, the newly

ascendant merchant class—Marx’s bourgeoisie—shrugged off the chains of superstition and traditional privilege, empowered by the secular Enlightenment values of reason and rationality. The novel reflected this transformation in aesthetic terms because its primary criterion was the truth of individual experience (replacing collective tradition); individual experience which is always unique and therefore new—or more precisely, *novel* (13).

Written in prose rather than verse (the language of merchants and bankers rather than courtiers and aristocrats), the novel’s main task was to represent the richness of individual lived experience and the quotidian reality of everyday life rather than the elevated moments associated with earlier, more ritualistic forms such as the tragedy or epic.

Describing Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Watt notes that “his total subordination of the plot to the pattern of the autobiographical memoir is as defiant an assertion of the primacy of individual experience in the novel as Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* was in philosophy” (15).

The simultaneous appearance of the novel and birth of the modern individual—the Cartesian subject—are by no means a historical coincidence. Indeed the two exist in a relationship that is, to a degree, reciprocal and mutually conditioning. The novel is not just the literary representation of the hegemonic subject—it is intimately caught up in the (re)production of this very subjectivity. In other words, the literary form does not simply reflect reality; it actively shapes and molds it. The novel conditions readerly expectations and assumptions about what it means to be an individual, both explicitly (when the reader actively identifies with the characters on the page) and implicitly (when the reader passively accepts the narrative conventions of the novel—its form—as unproblematic or,

put another way, as indistinguishable from the perceiving consciousness of the modern subject; as *real*). Reading the novel, then, is but one of the many disciplinary and regulatory practices that helped to inculcate a sense of modern individuality. Certainly, without the subtle influence of discursive feedback mechanisms such as the novel it is doubtful that this modern idea of individual subjectivity would be possible in the first place. But if it is a mistake to claim that the novel and the modern subject exist in isolation then by the same token the attempt to reduce them to the same thing is equally misguided. Obviously, novels do not walk or talk; they are not autonomous. Though it may be an acceptable representation of individuality, the novel is not a substitute for a person. Watt's study remains compelling because of the resiliency of the concept he introduces—formal realism—which mediates between the two.

Formal realism refers “to a set of narrative procedures which are so commonly found together in the novel, and so rarely in other literary genres, that they may be regarded as typical of the form itself” (33). Ranging from the believability of the events portrayed to the accuracy of cognitive processes depicted, these narrative procedures are designed, above all, to convey “a full and authentic report of human experience” (33). Though Watt uses “formal realism” strictly as a theory of the novel, it also corresponds to the phenomenological process by which humans make sense of the world in general; narrative, in other words, is not something that only exists between the covers of a book, it also designates the way in which experience is ordered into a cohesive and coherent whole. The novel's “success,” then, depends almost entirely on the extent to which it approximates the psychology of the modern subject. For this reason, the novel's narrative

conventions demand less of the reader than those of other literary forms precisely because they are so *familiar*. Concomitantly, they are difficult to isolate and examine because that presumes a similar detachment from the reader's own thought processes. Ultimately, the novel's formal realism depends on the uninterrogated presence of a perceiving consciousness (a "modest witness"¹²) able to identify causal relations and draw consequences from what may otherwise appear as an unruly assemblage of coincidences.

In *American Psycho*, to return to the matter at hand, Bret Easton Ellis turns this basic tenet of formal realism upon its head by dispensing with the modern notion of subjectivity. According to the criteria established by Watt, Patrick is not a person at all, not in any meaningful sense. Neither Patrick himself nor the reader can depend on the reliability of his sense-perception since it is so often described in filmic and thus unreal terms. That he lacks interiority is by now well-established, not to mention corroborated by Patrick himself: "*I am simply not there*" (377). And contrary to his great wealth and privilege, Patrick also lacks autonomy because he is utterly in thrall to commodities. For these reasons, Elizabeth Young argues that Patrick is more cipher than character, largely because he is incapable of thinking about himself (or anyone else, for that matter) beyond a frame of reference completely dominated by things: "Patrick's absorption in the minutiae of the moment colludes with the author's intention of negating him as a character. At every step he is being rubbed out... every mention of 'real' brand names and

¹² This quality of transparency or invisibility—*modesty*—is of special note. As Donna Haraway, a noted social historian of science has pointed out, the entire discourse of science that provides us with the most codified instance of Enlightenment rationality is premised on the observations of the modest witness. The authority of the modest witness, the objective force of his pronouncements, derives from his occupation of a subject position unmarked by sex, race and (presumably) class. I say "his" because such a witness is typically a white man, one whose modesty is visible precisely because the witness is not. See "Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium" in *The Haraway Reader* (Routledge 2004, 223-250).

designer clothes dates as quickly as the ink can dry” (103). Because Patrick is constantly under the threat of erasure according to the rapid cycling of fashion he identifies with so assiduously, he is quite literally unbelievable *as a character*. He amounts to little more than the personification of a void, in this case, one created by consumerism run amok. As David Price asks:

Couldn't Bateman be much more accurately described as the collective consciousness of 1980s advertising than as an individualized autonomous consciousness? Aren't his thoughts little more than the accretion of ad copy and popular ideas spread by the all-pervasive media? Does Bateman ever have an individual thought that is unrelated to the perceived ideas of his consumer culture? (340)

Young's observations and Price's queries suggest that Patrick's account is not only unreliable, but of a much more indeterminate status, undermining the coherence, indeed, *the possibility*, of the narrative as a whole. No standards exist within the text for either Patrick himself or the reader to judge his veracity of his claims. Instead, *American Psycho* reads as increasingly phantasmagoric and hallucinatory as the stability of the perceiving consciousness disintegrates. Indeed, by the end of the novel Patrick completely unravels: “I'm having a sort of hard time paying attention because my automated teller has started *speaking* to me... and I was freaked out by the park bench that followed me for six blocks last Monday evening and it too spoke to me” (395). The first casualty of degraded formal realism is the reality principle itself.

This, more or less, brings us back to Norman Mailer's critical stance on the text. Not only does Patrick lack “inner life,” the text is so thoroughly immersed in Patrick's insanity that nothing remains that would allow the reader to distinguish between interior/ exterior or subject/object. Ellis has succeeded in penning a truly warped tale, one that is

both morally perverse and impervious to reason. But, as I noted in the introduction, this is hardly the whole story as most critics concede that Ellis's satirical intent is obvious even as it appears to be pre-empted and undermined by his execution. Critical anxiety about the text, whether in response to its "shapelessness" (recalling its status as an anatomy) or to Ellis's deconstruction of the principles of formal realism, has been largely unable to account for the fact that the continuity and coherence of the narrative *must come from somewhere*. In what follows, I will demonstrate that it is through its much-maligned setting, in particular the profusion of detail about the commodities that make up Patrick's world, that we are able to make sense of such an apparently senseless text. First, however, I want to read *American Psycho* more closely to show how Ellis embeds formal problems within the narrative from the very beginning.

Party Politics: The Problem of Patrick's Voice

Opening abruptly, the story begins in the back seat of a cab, capturing Tim Price, who, like Patrick is with Pierce and Pierce and twenty-six, in mid-rant. Price's speech is notable because it prefigures the dominant conversational style of the novel, littered with parataxis and *non sequiturs*. Ranging from nonsensical comments about imaginary sexually transmitted diseases ("you can get dyslexia from *pussy*"), sartorial consultation ("Why aren't you wearing the worsted navy blue blazer with the gray pants?") to counting homeless people while simultaneously making plans for the evening ("number twenty-four, nope, twenty-five... Who's going to be at Evelyn's? Wait let me guess") and complaining about his girlfriend ("I mean I tell her I'm sensitive. I told her I was freaked

out by the Challenger accident—what more does she want?”), Tim establishes the narrative voice that Patrick Bateman will soon make his own (4-5). I say “soon” here because in the first chapter Patrick is remarkably circumspect. For a novel that so totally identifies with his narrative perspective, he first appears as a retiring presence—a personality that barely registers. In the first few pages of the novel, then, Ellis utilizes a curious strategy that casts doubt on the fact that Patrick is the central figure. Perhaps it is this sort of narrative prank that he has in mind by entitling this chapter “April Fools”. The first glimmerings of his personality appear well into the chapter, after he and Price have arrived at a party thrown by Patrick’s girlfriend Evelyn, who emphasizes Patrick’s blandness by repeatedly describing him as “the boy next door” (11, 18, 20); in fact she interpellates him as such (“aren’t you, honey?”). Patrick rebels rather than acquiesce to this mundane characterization: “No I’m not,” I whisper to myself. “I’m a fucking evil psychopath” (20).

Patrick’s *sotto voce* response is only the first in a series of horrifying declarations that go unacknowledged within the text. What makes this so strange is that Patrick soon abandons the appearance of propriety and later in the book begins to quite openly and enthusiastically voice sentiments such as telling a bartender that “You are a fucking ugly bitch I want to stab to death and play around with your blood” while confessing to Evelyn that she couldn’t come over to his place “because your neighbor’s head was in my freezer” (59, 118). What are we to make of such deranged commentary? In the early going, at least, it is possible to argue that people simply don’t hear him; that Patrick is somehow on mute. Both conversations with Evelyn and the bartender, for example, take

place in noisy settings. That, however, becomes less and less likely as Patrick goes to great lengths to make sure that he is heard, culminating in a long, rambling confession on his lawyer's answering machine. Alternately, we could argue that Patrick is an extremely unreliable narrator, based on admissions like "I'm utterly insane" and "I like to dissect girls" and the placid response of his friends to such seemingly incendiary statements (216). Perhaps none of this is really happening and the entire narrative is nothing more than the ramblings of a depraved and disturbed mind. There is also a third possibility that Patrick's interlocutors hear him quite clearly but due to a combination of circumstance, stupidity and deference to his class position, no one is willing to say or do anything about it. It is all true, it is all happening and it is all utterly routine. Patrick's friends not only accept eccentricities like murdering homeless people, they in all likelihood partake in such decadent pursuits themselves because there is no evidence to the contrary. Tim Price establishes the basis of this reading with boasts like: "When I tell them what my annual income is, believe me, my behavior couldn't matter less" (53).¹³ We are provided with a number of divergent and contradictory readings of what is really going on in *American Psycho*. What makes it so difficult to make sense of this novel is that Ellis provides few clues telling us which reading is the most plausible. What, for example, is the ontological status of a confession that is heard by no one?

¹³ There are a number of other incidents suggesting that even Patrick's most perverse behaviour, far from transgressing social norms, is actually rather mundane. In one, Patrick makes an obscene phone call to a girl whose number he stole from the register of her preparatory school:

"I orchestrate hostile takeovers. What do you think of that?" and I would pause before making sucking noises, freakish piglike grunts, and then ask, "Huh, *bitch*?" Most of the time I could tell they were frightened and this pleased me greatly, enabled me to maintain a strong, pulsing erection for the duration of the phone calls, until one of the girls, Hillary Wallace, asked, unfazed, "Dad, is that you?" and whatever enthusiasm I'd build up plummeted. (162)

Patrick's voice, then, is rendered problematic from the very beginning. Even his statements that are objectively verifiable (i.e. they are both heard and responded to by Patrick's interlocutors) turn out to be nonsense. While his professions of bloodshed and rapt descriptions of torture exude a delusional quality, Patrick's more banal pronouncements evince a perhaps greater disconnect from reality, largely because they reveal the impoverishment of his critical abilities. Enfeebled by his constitutive inability to register more than the surface of things, Patrick is incapable of recognizing contradiction and other logical relations of greater complexity than, say, agglomeration. Hence his relentlessly cataloguing eye, which obsessively provides lists and inventories but appears quite blind to any relation that cannot be depicted in similarly serial fashion. Simply put, Patrick "is incapable of thinking" (Young 97). These limitations are achingly obvious from the outset, as an incident at Evelyn's party quite clearly shows.

At the *soiree*, an argument soon arises over gentrification between Price and Evelyn's "artiste" friends Stash and Vanden, who inject some punk exotica into what is otherwise a staid yuppie gathering. The immediate context for this discussion is the heated debate over gentrification that gripped New York in the 1980s, culminating in the Tompkins Square Park riots of 1988. Opponents of yuppie beautification projects charged that urban renewal amounted to little more than a war on the poor.¹⁴ In the novel, the dispute is centered upon a magazine article entitled THE DEATH OF DOWNTOWN.

¹⁴ For a fictional treatment of the gentrification debate from below, so to speak, see Joel Rose's *Kill The Poor* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988). Rose's novel revolves around the efforts of marginal members of New York society (reformed addicts, ex-convicts, artists, gays and recent immigrants) to take back the formerly working-class Alphabet City section of Manhattan by "homesteading" in abandoned apartment buildings. Robert Fitch's *The Assassination of New York* (Verso, 1993) examines the failures of urban planning (e.g. New York's fiscal crisis in the mid-seventies when the city essentially went broke) that in no small part led to the urban decay chronicled by Rose.

Price is characteristically cavalier about the prospects of the less fortunate: “Who-gives-a-rat’s-ass?” Patrick leaps into the uncomfortable silence that follows, determined to redirect the conversation by asserting (blandly) that “there *are* more pressing problems at hand” (15). When Price presses him to explain, he launches into a diatribe that leaves his dinner companions bemused and ready for dessert. What is important is not so much what Patrick says—a series of loosely connected clichés corresponding to a vaguely liberal outlook—but *how* he says it. I reproduce the speech in its entirety because its significance is cumulative; what I’m interested in here is not the theme or meaning of Patrick’s discourse, but its effect or, in other words, what it *does*.

Well, we have to end apartheid for one. And slow down the nuclear arms race, stop terrorism and world hunger. Ensure a strong national defence, prevent the spread of communism in Central America, work for a Middle East peace settlement, prevent U. S. military involvement overseas. Now that’s not to belittle our domestic problems, which are equally important, if not more. Better and more affordable long-term care for the elderly, control and find a cure for the AIDS epidemic, clean up environmental damage from toxic waste and pollution, improve the quality of primary and secondary education, strengthen laws to crack down on crime and illegal drugs. We also have to ensure that college education is affordable for the middle class and protect Social Security for senior citizens plus conserve natural resources and wilderness areas and reduce the influence of political action committees.... But economically we’re still a mess. We have to find a way to hold down the inflation rate and reduce the deficit. We also need to provide training and jobs for the unemployed as well as protect existing American jobs from unfair foreign imports. We have to make America the leader in new technology. At the same time we need to promote economic growth and business expansion and hold the line against federal income taxes and hold down interest rates while promoting opportunities for small businesses and controlling mergers and big corporate takeovers.... But we can’t ignore our social needs either. We have to stop people from abusing the welfare system. We have to provide food and shelter for the homeless and oppose racial discrimination and promote civil rights while also promoting equal rights for women but change the abortion laws to protect the right to life yet still somehow maintain women’s freedom of choice. We also have to control the influx of illegal immigrants, curb graphic sex and violence on TV, in movies, in popular music, everywhere. Most importantly, we

have to promote general social concern and less materialism in young people.
(15-16)

Patrick's prescription for the ailing Republic is, simply put, excruciatingly boring. His dinner party audience is left stunned and needs a moment to recover from the passage's main rhetorical effect: the production of lassitude. Even the reader will find this a difficult passage to parse. The simplistic and repetitive sentences grind away at one's attention, which is further distracted by the seemingly random collage of the world's ills. The proliferation of "ands" and "alsos" suggest that this is nothing more than a shopping list of popular causes; there is no more depth to his analysis than what could be gleaned from reading newspaper headlines. Instead, a series of issues are strung or jumbled together with no thought given to their possible interrelationships or contradictions (especially evident in Patrick's simultaneous adoption of a pro-life and pro-choice position). Even his "buts" serve no critical function such as signaling disagreement within a set of ideas. Instead, they merely emphasize a shift from politics to economics to social policy in a potentially endless process of dispersion and displacement. In short, Patrick is incapable of mediating within and between these categories (e.g. politics) because he fails to recognize that they are part of a larger totality; what is absent from his wish list is the acknowledgment of *necessity*.

This passage also provides an explicit counterpoint to Tim Price's rambling back-seat-of-the-cab riff that opens the novel. Expressed in the bloodless prose some would describe as limousine liberalism, Patrick's lofty speech ultimately shares the same thematic concerns of Tim's street-level take on the yuppie *flâneur*, but the similarities go nearly unrecognized because of jarring variations in register and tone. Both for example,

discourse at length on poverty, disease and social injustice, but where Patrick's monologue fairly oozes with principled compassion and highminded ideals, Price's hums with the tension of starkly obvious class struggle. His antagonism is channeled through a copy of the *New York Post*. Flipping through the tabloid (a famously low-brow alternative to the *Times*), Price cites a seemingly endless stream of cultural effluvia as proof of the city's decline: "... baseball players with AIDS, more Mafia shit, gridlock, the homeless, various maniacs, faggots dropping like flies in the streets, surrogate mothers, the cancellation of a soap opera..." (4). By cataloguing the misery of others, Price indulges in a sadistic display of *schadenfreude*, a gesture that rhetorically distinguishes him from the huddled masses he so detests and one that seems entirely unnecessary and excessive given the material fact of his privilege, which *ipso facto* sets him apart. Class privilege, admittedly, needs to be constantly reinforced and reproduced. While the production of wealth is the duty of the working class, the reproduction of social control is the form of labour unique to the rich.

Most importantly, Price's tirade helps us understand just why Patrick's disquisition has such a deadening effect—both on his peers and the reader. Patrick's political analysis provides the occasion for what is perhaps his longest speech in the novel and certainly his most sustained argument. For all that, it is a miserable failure because he is incapable of offering anything more than a list of priorities, not why they are or should be. Patrick's politics so easily fray because they are expressed in the abstract. His speaking voice is evacuated of individual content as he parrots the received wisdom of various op-ed contributors and the immediacy of his context is similarly elided by his

insistence on speaking in general terms. There is no sense here, for example, of who “we” are beyond that of an audience homogenous in opinion and situation and one that extends beyond the partygoers in attendance, encompassing all of America in a vague embrace. Price’s rant, on the other hand, is granted a certain vividness because it is filtered through his own consciousness and concrete in that his fleeting attention helps establish both character (we learn something of his background) and setting (he describes Patrick’s clothing and not only comments on the ubiquitous homeless but actually counts them). The kinetic energy of his account, the speed with which he makes unpredictable leaps from one topic to the next, stands in stark contrast to Patrick’s plodding speech, which shares Price’s penchant for detailed description but achieves an almost entirely opposite effect. The proliferation of detail doesn’t establish character or setting; instead it functions rhetorically by providing a surplus of evidence to prove a point. The problem, of course, is that *there is no point* and Patrick’s overwhelming level of detail turns out to be oppressive rather than convincing. The only response is no response and so Evelyn, the good hostess, turns to the next course: “I have... sorbet” (16).

Ellis, then, uses the introductory chapter to establish Patrick’s distinctively flat narrative voice, one that rarely ventures beyond first person, present tense observations made in the indicative mood—the least complex syntactical arrangement in the English language (Murphet 25, 45). Animating such a voice was not easy; telling an interviewer about his heavily outline-based writing process, Ellis detailed the precautions that he took to make sure his narrator stayed in character:

That’s the part of the outline that I tend to go back to the most often when I’m working: what can be included in this narrator’s voice and what cannot be

included. For example, with Patrick Bateman the notes read “include constant references to status, products, clothing,” etc. The notes also read “omit metaphors, similes, anything where Patrick Bateman can see something as something else because everything is too surface oriented for that to occur.” Cut anything that seems lyrical or poetic. If any of that comes out in the writing and it could be the kind of sentence I love and is very beautiful and flowing to me, I would still remove it because it doesn’t fit into Patrick Bateman’s voice. (Clark)

Patrick is capable of little more than stringing together a series of conjunctions; he is utterly at a loss to engage in abstract reasoning and mediate between things and concepts. Everything in his world appears to be unproblematically self-evident and thus occupies the same plane of existence. This ultimately reductive vision collapses the distinction between people and things by arranging them in a serial relationship to one another. One passage in particular exemplifies this reifying process because it captures one of the very few moments where Patrick is self-reflective, that is, where he thinks about himself thinking.

J&B I am thinking. Glass of J&B in my right hand I am thinking. Hand I am thinking. Charivari. Shirt from Charivari. Fusilli I am thinking. Jami Gertz I am thinking. I would like to fuck Jami Gertz I am thinking. Porsche 911. A sharpei I am thinking. I would like to own a sharpei. I am twenty-six years old I am thinking. I will be twenty-seven next year. A Valium. I would like a Valium. No, two Valium I am thinking. Cellular phone I am thinking. (80-81)

This phenomenological parody reveals that self-reflection does not necessarily translate as self-awareness. There is something strangely robotic about this; like a video camera pointed towards a mirror, Patrick accounts for his own existence but lacks the reason to ascribe any meaning to it beyond the simple fact of presence. He itemizes, lists and catalogues but fails utterly when it comes to positing a relationship among the components he has assembled (whether they be couture, cuisine or consumer electronics) beyond that of seriality and agglomeration: Hand, shirt, and Jami Gertz. The only thing

that grants this list any sort of coherence or continuity is the emphasis on the consciousness that perceives them. What is achieved, however, is entirely counter to the intended effect. The insistent ‘I’s in Patrick’s riff appear less the assured expression of a stable self than a nervous tic or spasm. This hysterical affirmation of identity undoes itself at every turn as the frequency of its assertion suggests that what at first appears to be a confident narrative voice is in fact little more than an involuntary response. As Julian Murphet explains, when a first person voice “fixes itself to habit with a ferocious determination, the effect is quite the opposite from the usual literary conception of a ‘self’. Rather, what the voice gives us is a kind of *non-self*, a self defined not by freedom and the open horizon of the undetermined, but by repetition and tunnel vision.” Ellis’s novel, in other words, is “an interminable monologue of the non-self, which is, at some hypothetical socio-psychological limit, the lived ‘self’ of everyday life in contemporary America” (25).

If these professions of selfhood—“I am thinking”—serve the paradoxical function of revealing Patrick’s non-self, they also provide some indication as to what exactly this non-self consists of. The crucial element in this passage is the increasingly oppressive incantation of the present tense. The absence of diachrony in the rambling monologue suggests that this perceiving consciousness is a remarkably impoverished one. Without the concept of past or future, Patrick accepts as de facto an eternal and immutable present. Indeed, part of the difficulty in reading for plot in *American Psycho* is the atrophied time-sense within the narrative. Patrick’s account, which so often resorts to cinematic metaphors to establish his distance from his immediate surroundings and sensations, is

structured according to the fragmented logic of the jump cut. A morning business meeting is followed by the power lunch, but not necessarily on the same day.¹⁵ The only clues that the sequence of events has been disrupted are usually found in the setting—Patrick inexplicably wearing a new set of clothes or surrounded by new people (Young 101). The narrative itself is constructed on a grand scale of such disjointed and randomly shuffled episodes that follow a broad chronology¹⁶ but within that chronology often appear out of sequence. This undermines the surety of Patrick’s voice, in no small part because he fails to even notice or account for the discrepancies in his own telling, leaving it to the careful eye of the reader to establish the text’s admittedly oblique chronology (discussed below).

“You’re *total GQ* Bateman”: From Voice to Chorus

American Psycho is a novel of voices, not just one. In this section, I examine how Patrick’s identification with the *GQ* milieu conspires to rob him of his identity in the same way that speech undermines the speaker above. A scion of inherited wealth and, as a

¹⁵ A typical example of this takes place in the transition from the first to the second chapter. If the title of the first—“April Fools”—is supposed to indicate that Evelyn’s party takes place on April first, then a significant dislocation of time has occurred between the end of the chapter (Patrick turning in for the night) and beginning of the next. Titled “Morning”, chapter two takes us through Patrick’s daily ablutions, but we have suddenly been transported into “the early light of a May dawn” (24).

¹⁶ The novel takes place during the period 1987-1989. Patrick provides personal milestones which allow the attentive reader to date his exploits: he often notes his age (either twenty-six or twenty-seven) and draws a parallel between himself and his friend Paul Owen: “We were both seven in 1969” (272). In the backdrop to the novel’s final scene, scenes from George H. W. Bush’s presidential inauguration (January 20, 1989) play on the ubiquitous Patty Winters Show. Since the novel concludes in 1989 with an occasion that surely marks the “End of the 1980s” (as Reagan’s presidency terms out and Bush’s begins) it is quite remarkable to note that the novel commences in 1987 with no mention whatsoever of the infamous stock market crash that put the brakes on the speculative excess Ellis satirizes.

member of the professional class, embodiment of New York's transformed economy¹⁷, Patrick presumably 'works' with abstract values, creating wealth through financial speculation. Work, however, is little more than a distraction—conspicuous consumption is the *raison d'être* of his world. He has a facility with commodities and consumerist practices that is uncanny; far from being the articulate repository of useless bits of information and trivia, Patrick is capable of putting this knowledge into action in a way that paradoxically precludes *knowing*. Patrick, in other words, has nothing to do with the world of production. As Julian Murphet explains, Patrick “very precisely *does nothing*; but his control over certain kinds of information and ‘taste’ assumes the importance for him of a kind of action” (33). Status within Patrick's yuppie coterie is conferred almost exclusively on those who demonstrate expertise in a variety of *GQ*-sanctioned subjects, concentrated mainly in matters of style and conduct. Their proficiency, however, masks an existential terror that there is nothing outside of the arcane set of rules that he and his friends have established for themselves. Consumption is less a physical act in Patrick's world than the symbolic management of an undifferentiated flow of immaterial signs; labels and brands are of far more importance than the actual products they designate. Patrick's increasingly violent acting-out can be interpreted as his attempt to rediscover the certainty of material existence through the physical suffering of others. By inflicting pain, he hopes to establish an external referent to what has become a closed system of randomly occurring and ceaselessly circulating signs by rooting it in (primarily) the

¹⁷ Robert Fitch notes that in the post-1945 era, civic officials in New York made a policy of slashing manufacturing jobs in favour of office work (because of the exorbitant rents commanded by office space compared to factories). Generally speaking, this reversed the ratio of white collar to blue collar jobs (once 1:2, now 2:1) and specifically, created a boom in what he describes as the FIRE industries (finance, insurance, real estate).

bodies of women and the underclass. The nihilism of his gesture, however, is eventually recuperated by the very system he means to repudiate. Patrick's assaults build towards the most radical act of violence imaginable, the desecration of the human body through cannibalistic incorporation, which is at the same time the ultimate form of consumption. What makes *American Psycho* so claustrophobic is that even at his most extreme Patrick is incapable of escaping from the stifling *GQ* logic of reification.

Along with his friends, Patrick is caught up in an endless loop of social obligations, whether eating at trendy bistros, working out, clubbing, summering or making an appearance on the party circuit. Since his family's wealth ensures his financial independence, he works only because, as he tells an old girlfriend: "I... just... want... to... fit... in" (237). His job, for example, fulfils an ornamental¹⁸ rather than instrumental function, captured in one memorable episode by a competitive display of business cards. Patrick is immensely proud of his card's subtle colour (bone) and elegant font (Silian Rail)... at least until his friend Van Patten pulls out his own ("eggshell with Romalian type"). Both, however, are put to shame by Montgomery's card ("Raised lettering, pale nimbus white"), leaving Patrick overcome with jealousy and despair: "I am unexpectedly depressed that I started this" (44-45).¹⁹ The emotional rollercoaster he experiences in response to such trite corporate pedantry is a moment of great comic satire, revealing the utter seriousness with which Patrick and his friends strive for superficiality. What passes for banter among them consists of trying to catch each other out on the finer points of

¹⁸ In *Stiffed*, Susan Faludi examines the impact of immaterial labour on traditional masculine values. She argues that contemporary masculinity is defined by its facility with ornament rather than actual substance due to the spread of consumerist values and disappearance of substance (read: manufacturing) jobs.

¹⁹ Significantly, this card is actually in the possession of Tim Price who always seems one step ahead of Patrick.

etiquette, grooming, and sartorial savvy: “What are the rules for a sweater vest?” (153). Such questions are generally referred to Patrick who is deemed the expert in matters of taste and thus treated with deference by his friends. Van Patten tells him “You are pure prep perfection” while Reeves enthuses “You’re *total GQ* Bateman” (47, 90).

While Patrick is marginally better at being *GQ* than his friends, he must constantly reassert his primacy (and on occasion, as the episode with the business cards shows, relinquish it). The relentless and unending competition amongst Patrick and his friends is not merely the decadent frivolity of an aristocratic class. It also reproduces a system of minor differences based on one’s relative position in the great game of status. The only thing distinguishing Patrick and his friends from one another is the degree to which they succeed at approximating the yuppie ideal: the *GQ* man.²⁰ What makes him so very *GQ* is that he doesn’t have to think about the significance of the various brands and consumerist practices that make up his world—to him, they are experienced viscerally rather than intellectually. His mastery of yuppie status games, for example, appears so effortless precisely because *it requires no effort*. Patrick, in short, is not simply fashionable but the incarnation of fashion itself. It is in this realm of artifice that Patrick is most at home, a native. Paradoxically, however, fashion is the privileged expression of Patrick’s agency while at the same time it precludes the possibility of agency as such.

Fashion, as exemplified by the yuppie ego-ideal, negates identity because it embraces a system whereby meaning and value are not fixed but produced differentially. The *GQ* man is an aftereffect or visual hallucination produced by flipping through the

²⁰ My thanks to Tim Walters, whose suggestions in his unpublished article “Deconstructing the GQ Man: Apocalyptic Intertextuality in *American Psycho*” have influenced my argument here..

pages of the magazine; an assemblage of apparel, toiletries, accessories, experiences, manners, etc. Crucially, these components are interchangeable—Patrick is recognizably *GQ* even if he exchanges a Soprani suit for one by Alexander Julian.²¹ The implication, one that Ellis plays with at various points in the novel and enshrines as a central plot twist, is that Patrick and his cohorts are interchangeable, too. The names ‘Patrick’ or ‘Van Patten’ or ‘Preston’ function as signifiers in the same way as ‘Calvin Klein’ or ‘Ermenegildo Zegna’. Indeed, Patrick’s acquaintances are described exclusively in sartorial terms—they are physically nondescript, a disembodied chorus of utterly indistinguishable voices. Faced with the nearly impossible task telling the characters apart, the reader is immersed in an atmosphere of confusion analogous to the daily experience of the characters themselves, who are constantly mistaking each another for someone else; “everyone looks familiar, everyone looks the same” (61).²² Aside from the aforementioned yuppie status games, mistaken identity is the one constant of Patrick’s social world. Every time he is out at a restaurant, a bar, a club, he or his companions make at least one slip. ‘That wasn’t *Conrad*,’ I say, surprised by Price’s inability to recognize

²¹ Joking with an interviewer about the prepublication controversy that led to *American Psycho*’s cancellation, Ellis exclaims: “There are non-fiction books that are stopped for certain legalities, about defamation of character and things like that, but *defamation of clothing* (laughs)” (Clark, italics mine).

²² If the author is to be believed, they also all look *stupid*. The painfully detailed discussion of clothing in *American Psycho*, he tells an interviewer, required a great deal of research on his part, research that was in no way reflective of his own interests:

I don’t like clothes. I wrote two novels, one around the fashion industry and one around clothes whores, and it was all research. It was looking through *GQ* and seeing what the guys on Wall Street were wearing, since every other pictorial during those two years had guys hanging out in front of various office buildings downtown. Also, what a lot of people don’t realize, and what I had a lot of fun with, is that if you really saw the outfits Patrick Bateman describes, they’d look totally ridiculous. He would describe a certain kind of vest with a pair of pants and certain kind of shirt, and you think, He really must know so much, but if you actually saw people dressed like this, they would look like clowns. It was a subtle joke. If you read it on a surface level and know nothing about clothes, you read *American Psycho* and think, My God, we’re in some sort of princely kingdom where everyone just walked out of *GQ*. No. They look like fools. They look like court jesters, most of them. (Weich)

co-workers. ‘That guy had a better haircut’ (50). Price’s faux pas is not that he misrecognizes *Conrad*, but that he fails to recognize Conrad’s *haircut*. Identity is non-essential and thus ultimately alienable because it has been reduced to a random series of disarticulable components (haircuts, clothes, business cards, etc.). If you recombine them in a different order or with slight modifications, you end up with someone else entirely—a distinction, however, that is one of degree rather than of kind. As Patrick admits, “Even though I’m more handsome than Craig, we both look pretty much the same” (222).

The problem of identity persists outside of Patrick’s elite social circles, but for very different reasons. Patrick’s interactions with the lower class are characterized not so much by mistaken identity as a refusal to concede that they in fact have one.²³ In his dealings with what he terms “members of the genetic underclass”—bartenders, doormen, cabdrivers and bums—Patrick is unable to distinguish between people because they lack the cues to which he responds. The faceless masses are, in other words, unredeemed by commodities and most definitely *not GQ*. One episode in particular demonstrates how the absence of brands leaves Patrick adrift with no reference points to navigate by. While renting *Body Double*, Patrick finds himself made increasingly anxious by the video store clerk’s lack of designer clothing and blithe indifference to celebrity namedropping (“Don’t you know who Jami Gertz *is*?” he demands). Her refusal of the very system of names and trademarks that underpins Patrick’s reality creates a null space right in front of

²³ Except for crude racial epithets—frustrated with his Chinese drycleaner’s inability to get the bloodstains out of his high-thread count sheets, Patrick resorts to an offensive pidgin to communicate his displeasure: “Bleach-ee?” I ask her. ‘Are you trying to say *bleach-ee*?’ I shake my head, disbelieving.... ‘Stupid bitch-ee? Understand?’ (82-83).

him, a void of signification he is compelled to fill by finding a brand, any brand, to mark it and thus make sense of it.

I take a deep breath and ... my head starts nodding of its own accord and I keep swallowing, thinking *I have to see her shoes*, and so as inconspicuously as possible I try to peer over the counter to check out what kind of shoes she's wearing but maddeningly they're only sneakers—*not* K-Swiss, *not* Tretorn, *not* Adidas, *not* Reebok, just cheap ones. (113)

The transaction completed, she hands Patrick his video without looking at him, “refusing to recognize who I am” (113). The existential angst provoked by a bored sales clerk is intriguing. On one hand, Patrick doubtlessly looks forward to a frisson of pleasure at shocking the jaded staffer with his thirty-seventh rental of the film for admittedly perverse reasons (“I like the part... where the women... gets drilled by the... power driller in the movie”). On the other, his disquiet at remaining anonymous reflects on his failure to assign any sort of brand identity to the girl. In a strange way, he experiences the absence of commodification as the positivization of a void. Patrick himself is nothing more than the designer clothes that he wears, boutique products that he uses and fine cuisine that he consumes. The anxiety that grips him, what he refers to over and over as “nameless dread,” is prompted by the clerk’s indifference to the only thing he values. What is at stake in her intransigence is more than a shiver of pleasure Patrick might feel at seeing his superiority confirmed by her adoption of the wrong brand (or worse, a generic product). More importantly, by resisting brands altogether she commits the worst sin imaginable in Patrick's world: she fails to confirm his existence. In order to be *GQ* one must submit to the uncanny epiphany that agency is not only expressed in terms of one’s facility with things, the things themselves grant it.

For all that, there are several characters in the novel for whom Patrick has an affinity that stretches even beyond the shared pursuit of *GQ* nirvana. Some have a mutual history with Patrick—his brother Sean and ex-girlfriend Bethany being the most notable examples. Others, however, share a much more immediate relationship with the narrator. Three characters in particular—Tim Price, Paul Owen and Donald Kimball—function as his double(s); Patrick makes a point of noting that they are all the same age and emphasizes the similarity of their appearance. At first glance, this appears a contradictory strategy for a novel that eschews psychological depth. How can one be a double of a non-self? Doubling is, after all, a strategy that privileges reflection. In a face-to-face encounter with one's double, the stability of the perceiving consciousness is not only reaffirmed, it is retroactively conferred. That is to say, the *image* of a bounded and unified self precedes the actual felt 'sense' of self, which prior to this mirror stage (to borrow from Lacan) is dimly aware of itself only as an agglomerate of partial objects rather than as a totality of these parts or, in other words, *as a subject*.

Traditionally, literary criticism has treated doubling and reflection as the central motif for the growth and development of the subject, a dialectical process whereby the self constantly confronts It(self) in a dynamic process of normative subject formation. Far from this clinical depiction of psychological wellbeing, Patrick finds himself in a uniquely postmodern bind. The experience of confronting his double(s) proves to be unbearable; rather than bolster his sense of self, these encounters compel him to recognize that he does not in fact have one. "Price and Bateman represent not a contrast but a continuum, in theory reversible," notes Robert Zaller (320). Patrick's agony, adds

Elizabeth Young, “consists of the way his interior life keeps leaking into the public arena only to be inauthentic, so that he has to reinforce his ‘self’, his ‘identity’, in ever more extreme and violent ways” (118). As we shall see in the following section, the cascading series of brutal assaults that provide *American Psycho* with its nominal plot are prompted by Patrick’s desperate search for limits in the attempt to demarcate a stable self.

Plotting Violence: The Affective Trajectory of *American Psycho*

The plot of *American Psycho*, the experience of narrative events *through time*, enacts as well as portrays the limitations of Patrick’s narrative voice, which is confounded by his difficulty in conceptualizing the relationships between things on a temporal or diachronic axis. His very awareness is reified since he unquestioningly accepts as self-evident that which is simply present; he is incapable of seeing beyond the given to the possibility or potentiality of other modalities, other states. Patrick, in short, is a vulgar materialist held utterly in thrall to the testimony of his senses. Without the ability to mediate, *to think*, he accepts what lies in front of him absolutely. This renders the notion of a unified, coherent narrative voice problematic, particularly when Patrick is confronted by contradiction, which he is constitutively incapable of recognizing, let alone resolving. Instead, he distributes contradictions across a spatial axis, where they are reduced to synchronic relationships measurable only in terms of proximity, repetition, and intensity. His experience of the world is hellish, to recall Berger, because it is structured according to the principle of contiguity, not continuity, and sequence, rather than consequence.

While the recursive structure of *American Psycho* militates against linear plot development, the narrative is nonetheless carried along by a vague sense of momentum. Patrick's violent episodes 'progress' in both scale and baroque inventiveness from the first chapter onwards. I suggest that if this text has any sort of internal logic, it is one that is ultimately indistinguishable from the logic of its violence.²⁴ That there is any logic to Patrick's violence is by no means obvious; in fact, it is most often treated as a series of random and unrelated eruptions.

Ellis has already created a most unusual creature, a serial sex-killer, who is also, at the same time, prepared to kill absolutely anyone... Killers have their modus operandi and in the "Chase, Manhattan" chapter, Ellis compounds the absurdity by making Patrick both a serial-killer and mass murderer, two quite distinct types who have never been known to co-exist within one person. (115)

In the passage above, Elizabeth Young correctly observes that Patrick's murderous impulses are expressed in distinct and mutually contradictory ways, but fails to take note of an underlying relationship beyond that of juxtaposition and pastiche. In contrast, I argue that Patrick's actions do plot an affective trajectory, albeit one that is difficult to isolate. Of all the criticism on *American Psycho*, none provides a sustained explication of the plot, which is seemingly the most basic element to any sort of literary reading. The resistance to probing beyond its seemingly formless, episodic structure emanates from the text itself. In part, this is due to the flat narrative voice which makes no distinction between murders and mergers; it takes a great deal of effort and a careful eye to sift

²⁴ Carla Freccero makes the persuasive case that "the serial killer is a popular American figure of dementia" that is ultimately non-threatening because his pathology is singular, non-rational and eccentric. Moreover, "he is the means of the disavowal of institutionalized violence, while the 'seriality' of his acts of violence marks the place of recognition in this disavowal" (48). The serial killer, in other words, embodies an otherwise abstract social contradiction in such a way that precludes dialectical resolution of the conflict because recognition is displaced into narrative form; because he is ultimately apprehended, the serial killer proves to be a consoling figure, a recuperative fantasy that stages intractable contradiction as external to the social order rather than integral to it.

through the plethora of detail. However, even within the category of violent behaviour and vicious impulses, it is exceedingly difficult to make sense of the entirely contradictory chronology Patrick establishes. The problem, in a nutshell, is this: the violence which takes place in the present tense of Patrick's account does increase in both tempo and intensity, suggesting at least some rudimentary psychopathology if only because Patrick's condition is clearly worsening. However, Patrick continually makes reference to past acts—rapes, murders, assaults—that predate the narrative entirely and succeed in radically destabilizing its already tenuous coherence.²⁵ If they are 'true' then they render any attempt to work up a recognizable psychopathology, a pattern of any kind, absolutely pointless. There is, in other words, a basic conflict between the plot and story of *American Psycho*. Peter Brooks sees the plot/story distinction as analogous to that of *sjuzet / fabula*. Russian Formalists argued that the readers must be attentive to discrepancies between the order of events *presented* and order of events *referred to* in the narrative (Brooks 12). In *American Psycho*, the murders committed by Patrick in the present tense and described in agonizing immediacy make up its plot. The other acts, which occur offstage, if you will, establish the chronology of Patrick's world, but do so in

²⁵ Among other things, Patrick gleefully recounts beheading a Harvard co-ed and raping an acquaintance Alison Poole at the Kentucky Derby "last spring" (207). This incident is the most intriguing because there is more going on here than sketching out Patrick's history. As Young notes "It seems as though Ellis is reinforcing the fact that Patrick's only 'existence' is within fiction" (108). The incident anchors Patrick in an intertextual realm because the victim Alison is actually the heroine of Jay McInerney's *Story of My Life*. McInerney is a close friend of Ellis, together they (along with Tama Janowitz) became known as the 'Brat Pack' a group of upstart New York writers who chronicled the 1980s yuppie milieu. By borrowing Alison for his own fiction Ellis is not only making a rhetorical gesture meant to highlight the artificiality of Patrick's world. He also works through his own passive-aggressive relationship with McInerney: "Jay had pissed me off somehow that week, and I decided the best way to get back at him was to have Alison Poole have an encounter with Patrick" (Barnes and Noble, online transcript). The erotic triangle composed of relationship between two active male authors mediated through a passive fictional female does uncomfortably resonate with the actual subject matter of *American Psycho*, where Patrick views women as interchangeable tokens or "hardbodies."

a referential fashion that the reader is unable to verify; the past murders for example, are only reported on and thus not directly available to us. Since it is difficult enough to verify what is going on the novel's present tense—because Patrick's sanity and thus the stability of his narrative perspective cannot be taken for granted—past events are at best unreliable. At worst, precisely because the random and incoherent violence of the story conflicts with the emergent pattern of the plot (i.e. the affective trajectory of Patrick's actions in the present), they render the entire narrative indeterminate. Having established this caveat—that the story relentlessly threatens to deconstruct the plot—it is now time to describe the plot itself in detail, particularly the way in which it both enjoins and frustrates our expectations of a linear narrative trajectory.

If narrative, as Peter Brooks argues, is desire for the end, then what are we to make of the final line: “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT”? (399). Not only does the novel resist closure, it does so within a narrative that employs the claustrophobic logic of the feedback loop or, to recall the Dantean allusion of the text's very first line, overlapping circles of hell. The novel's recursive structure falls into three distinct movements and a concluding section. Returning to the idea that *American Psycho* unfolds according to a logic of violence, I would like to suggest that the three movements correspond to three distinct murderous states. Each begins with Patrick's “mask of sanity”, if not quite firmly affixed, than at least in position. Quickly, however, Patrick finds himself “unable to maintain a credible public persona” and lashes out in increasingly brutal ways (297). At the peak of his violence, Patrick's slide into homicidal rage is abruptly halted (or punctuated) through the intervention of what are by far the oddest structural features

within *American Psycho*: three chapters consisting of what can only be termed music appreciation (more on that below). In the first section, punctuated by a chapter on the band Genesis, Patrick adopts the predatory calculus and cool mien of a serial killer. In the second (punctuated by the Whitney Houston chapter), his patience is replaced by passion as he sets his sights on his own social circle. The killings of his acquaintance Paul Owen and ex-girlfriend Bethany are personal, not random and attest to the faltering control he has over his disintegrating persona. In the third (punctuated by the Huey Lewis and the News chapter), Patrick begins as a serial killer who slays indiscriminately, flirts with cannibalism and morphs into a mass murderer in the cleverly titled “Chase, Manhattan” chapter (referencing both the financial institution and the main action as he embarks on a killing spree). As the culmination of his homicidal tendencies, the “Chase, Manhattan” sequence also attests to the complete fragmentation of Patrick’s character. The hallucinatory sequence is not only wildly improbably (rendered with the cinematic sense of detachment so common earlier on, the spree takes on the semblance of an action movie, complete with special effects, a huge body count and a car chase), it also showcases the total breakdown of Patrick’s narrative voice as he veers in and out of first and third person narration. A fourth and final section provides the novel with its *anticlimax*, dispelling the built-up tension of Patrick’s many depredations by suggesting that they are both unverifiable and inconsequential. It is left open to interpretation whether the crimes recounted in such gory detail actually happened because, in the end, it simply doesn’t matter.

The initial (vicious but non-lethal) attack doesn't take place until nearly a third of the way into the book, although the reader is certainly provided with clues as to what to expect. Even so, Patrick's torture of a homeless man and his dog still shocks because it is the first immediate and explicit depiction of violence in the text. The vagrant Al is left blinded, disfigured and with several stab wounds to his torso; the dog's front legs are broken. Patrick's rationale for his cruelty is that "I don't have anything in common with you," suggesting that the crucial factor in the attack is its impersonal nature (131). Al belongs to a faceless and expendable underclass; in Patrick's New York, bums are as much a part of the urban landscape as any other form of litter. In this, Patrick accepts as axiomatic Margaret Thatcher's infamous claim: "There is no such thing as society." Without totalizing concepts such as society, he is unable to conceive of any relation that might span the vast socioeconomic divide between them. Instead, the vagrant's destitution is a marker of absolute difference, one that makes him appear so foreign as to appear another species or, as Patrick later puts it, a permanent "member of the genetic underclass" (266). As such, there is little sport in his victimization: "my high slowly dissolves, its intensity diminishing. I grow bored, tired; the evening seems horribly anticlimactic and I start cursing myself for not going to that Salvadorian bistro with Reed Thompson and the guys" (132). The rush fades so quickly because the act itself is inconsequential; secure in his privilege, Patrick knows that he will never have to answer for his crimes. While the gulf between victim and assailant—and particularly the anonymity it confers—*enables* Patrick's assault, it also renders the crime ultimately meaningless. Patrick remains unsatisfied precisely because *he*—not Al—remains

anonymous. In a sense, this is a matter of adrenalin; in order to experience euphoric highs, Patrick must up the ante and raise the stakes, presumably by putting himself at risk. More importantly, however, his violent outbursts are part of his struggle for recognition. As Hegel points out, “self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged” (111).

Patrick is caught up in a massive contradiction because in a *GQ* world, the distinction between self and other has been obliterated by the rising tide of fashion. The only kind of recognition available in such a world is mediated entirely through commodities; as a result, identity is disarticulated into a random combination of styles. Patrick and his friends cannot tell each other apart because they are all little more than bland variations on a theme, where individuality is incremental and expressed solely in consumerist terms (because difference is manufactured rather than innate). They exist in a state of permanent disorientation as everyone who counts as *GQ* appears vaguely familiar and yet ultimately unknowable—even the person in the mirror. Acknowledgement can never be more than provisional and contingent, even within the most intimate of relations. A homeless man, then, is in no position to provide the authentication Patrick so desperately seeks, not even in the grotesque spectacle of his back-alley suffering. Significantly, then, Patrick’s assault on Al was immediately preceded by a date with his

girlfriend Evelyn, one where “I finally expect her to acknowledge my character” (121).²⁶

Her failure to do so is as much cause of the attack as Patrick’s blind hatred for any kind of otherness (the un-*GQ*), be it in terms of class, race or sex/gender. Anonymity, as it turns out, proves to be a motivating factor in the assault on Al as well as an enabling one.

In the second movement of the book, Patrick abandons the semblance of restraint and relatively cautious experimentation with violence that characterized the first third. With his credentials as a violent stalker firmly in place, Patrick’s graduation to serial killing seems inevitable, in no small part because of his obsessive fascination with them, as his friends are quick to point out: “But you *always* bring them up,” McDermott complains. “And always in this casual, educational sort of way” (153). This pivotal section of the book starts where the previous one ended as Patrick’s next attack mirrors his first. This time, however, choosing a victim is far from random; a female beggar is “too easy a target” and a street busker is similarly unappealing: “though I smell prey, and he seems fully worthy of my wrath, I move on in search of a less dorky target” (163). In a repetition of the original crime, Patrick once again targets a (gay) man and his dog (a

²⁶ The conversation is exceedingly comic in effect; Patrick absentmindedly describes a poster he noticed while killing two black kids and tries his best to ignore Evelyn, who sounds remarkably like Patrick. She fades in and out of his awareness in a disjointed monologue touching on all things fashionable, ranging from gustation (“...Tandoori chicken and foie gras, and lots of jazz, and he adored the Savoy, but shad roe, the colors were gorgeous, aloe, shell, citrus, Morgan Stanley...”) to pedigreed matches (“... He went to Deerfield then Harvard. She went to Hotchkiss then Radcliffe...”). Evelyn eventually comes to her point—that they should marry (122-123). For his part, Patrick is taken aback by her aplomb (in addition to confessing to the murder of the black kids, he also admitted to killing her neighbour and storing the head in his freezer). Like most episodes in *American Psycho*, their conversation is strangely indeterminate. Does Evelyn really hear what Patrick is saying? It seems unlikely given his murderous confession and his reason for resisting their nuptials: “Because trying to fuck you is like trying to French-kiss a very... small and... lively gerbil? ... With braces?” I tell her. “I don’t know” (125). Her composure seems less a matter of a criminal partnership than one of total vapidness. Patrick realizes that “my essence is eluding her” and as a result asserts himself in ever more extreme ways in his struggle for recognition (124). Later on in the narrative however, Patrick formulates another reason for her seeming obliviousness: “For the first time I notice that she has been eyeing me for the last two years not with adoration but with something closer to greed” (338). His pique is replaced by a more pervasive disquiet as he realizes that while Evelyn seems perfectly willing to be an accessory to murder after the fact, as the *GQ* man he is little more than an accessory.

sharpei), although in this case, they are much more recognizably *GQ* than a homeless man and his mutt—the man asks Patrick if he is a fashion model (165).²⁷ While Patrick also sees this victim as a marginal member of society (by virtue of his homosexuality²⁸) he is much higher up the socioeconomic scale than Al. Patrick’s depredations are coming closer to home, the privileged orbit in which he lives. Other violent attacks soon follow. In a disturbing hint of the sexual murders to come, Patrick brings prostitutes back to his apartment for his sadistic brand of fun and leaves them bleeding, if breathing: “Tomorrow Sabrina will have a limp. Christie will probably have a terrible black eye and deep scratches across her buttocks caused by the coat hanger” (176). In these impersonal encounters (“Don’t you want to know what I do?” he asks his uninterested guests) Patrick oscillates between an overweening sense of superiority and seething frustration since his déclassé victims are in no position to acknowledge him. The novel could very well continue on in this vein interminably but something happens which renders Patrick’s actions meaningful and consequential—at least in terms of the plot.

Actually, three things happen—three encounters that turn Patrick’s struggle for recognition back upon himself and ultimately force him to acknowledge that “there is no real me” (376). Occupying a few dozen pages near the exact centre of the novel, these three episodes signal a decisive shift in both Patrick’s murderous urges and the tone and tenor of the narrative as a whole. In fact, they serve as a triptych illustrating the futility of Patrick’s aspirations; henceforth bloodshed will take on an increasingly frenzied quality

²⁷ In contrast with the bum, he does share at least one thing in common with his victim—in the “I am thinking” passage (81), Patrick states his desire for, among other things, a sharpei.

²⁸ The seeds for this particular assault are planted in the prior chapter where Patrick reacts violently after being accosted by a male acquaintance.

as Patrick's already tenuous persona starts to fall apart in earnest. Most notably, these encounters transform Patrick from an angel of death, one who appears to his victims as arbitrary and merciless as fate itself, to an inept bungler, whose murders are more defensive than contemptuous. Since Patrick can compel the mortal suffering of his "inferiors" but not their acknowledgement (he wouldn't know it if he had it, given that he doesn't recognize them as anything more than vermin), he must work his way up towards victims who matter. The significance of doubles to the plot of *American Psycho*, to which I alluded earlier, now comes into focus.

The first encounter takes the form of dinner with Paul Owen, a much-admired (and envied) figure in Patrick's circle—the epitome of everything *GQ*, a slightly more accomplished version of Patrick. The key to his potency is his responsibility for the near-mythic Fisher account, which is regarded as a sort of yuppie holy grail among Patrick's junior executive coterie. Patrick desperately covets the Fisher account, which exerts a talismanic attraction. What these accounts consist of is never disclosed; like business cards, they function more as empty signifiers and serve as nothing more than tokens of status in the workplace. More to the point, Patrick's greed for the Fisher account shows how his deranged brand of commodity fetishism extends even to his (admittedly nominal) labour. There is no facet of his life that is immune to the relentless one-upmanship and struggle for advantage. Steeped in the overheated market logic that encouraged

investment bankers and financial speculators to redefine white collar crime²⁹, Patrick sees the world as a zero-sum game. There can only be one top predator; all else prey. This is the elevation of what is after all a market mechanism, competition, into a principle of near-metaphysical inviolability. Accordingly, since the *GQ* dynamic itself is similarly zero-sum, Paul Owen's success necessarily translates into Patrick's failure. This proves to be less a humiliating experience for Patrick than an existentially chaotic one, for if he is not *GQ*, he is nothing at all.

The already fraught situation slides into crisis when Owen guilelessly undermines Patrick's fragile sense of his own identity by mistaking him for a co-worker, Marcus Halberstam: "for some reason it really doesn't matter and it seems a logical faux pas since Marcus works at P & P also, in fact does the same exact thing I do, and he has a penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses and we share the same barber at the same place, the Pierre Hotel, so it seems understandable; it doesn't irk me" (89). This misidentification proves to be the dramatic hinge of *American Psycho*. Though Patrick is not "irked" by the mistake, he makes a reservation in Halberstam's name and lures Owen back to his apartment, where he promptly dispatches him with an axe. Disposing of the body, Patrick covers up Owen's absence by leaving clues suggesting he has gone off to

²⁹ Rampant criminality at the time was exemplified by the 1989 collapse of Drexel Burnham Lambert (home to junk bond felon Michael Milken), financial speculators whose dubious business practices led to racketeering charges from the federal government. In an interview with Jaime Clark, Ellis explains his inspiration for the idea that Patrick's criminality and financial success go hand-in-hand also came from personal experience:

I knew a lot of friends at Bennington whose brothers were making a fortune on Wall St. and just living the whole 80's life and so I hung out with these guys for about two weeks because I wanted to find out what exactly people were doing. Now of course we all know they're in jail and so I know now why they couldn't talk about certain things, why they didn't take me to their offices, why they weren't extremely clear cut about what exactly their jobs entailed, how they were making so much money, etc. (Clark)

London on business.³⁰ Unlike the previous murders, which take place farther down the food chain, so to speak, and thus afflict those who ultimately don't 'matter,' Patrick strikes within his immediate circle of acquaintances, indeed, he strikes at its very centre. Ironically enough, the recognition he so craves is hardly forthcoming from the misguided Owen; even within the *GQ* circuit Patrick is still unable to escape the cloak of anonymity that has settled around him. This is the most important assault in the novel because it actually attains the status of an event with consequences, driving the plot in the latter half of the book, which I shall return to below.

In similar fashion, the second encounter takes place over dinner, although in this case it is with his younger brother Sean.³¹ Their fraught relationship—"I despise Sean and the feeling is unambiguously reciprocated"—is much more than a matter of sibling rivalry. The tension between them is not the product of different values, rather, it is due to the fact they are not different in the least.³² Sean is as handsome, cavalier, and connected as his brother; he is *very GQ*. He displays this specialized form of cultural competence in

³⁰ Aided by the fact that Paul is his double—both are the same age and physically indistinguishable: "My voice sounds similar to Owen's and to someone hearing it over the phone probably identical" (218). Furthermore, the deathblow catches Owen in midsentence—"Anyway, I used to hate Iggy Pop but now that he's so commercial I like him a lot better than—" (217)—interrupting a disquisition that sounds disturbingly similar in tone and appraisal to Patrick's narrative voice in the three musicology chapters (discussed in more detail below).

³¹ It is of some note here that Sean has a prior fictional existence—he is the protagonist of Ellis's 1987 novel *The Rules of Attraction*. The novel is written as a series of chapters with alternating narrative perspectives between Sean and his friends—even Patrick himself shows up as the narrator in one of the chapters. This lends credence to Young's suggestion about Ellis's use of intertextual strategies, namely, that no matter how psychotic and hallucinatory Patrick's account appears, we cannot simply dismiss it by confining it between the covers of a single book.

³² Embedded in this chapter is an interesting passage that indirectly comments on the problems of verifying Patrick's narrative voice by suggesting that Sean's account is equally difficult to substantiate: "Sean... went to Europe last fall, or at least this is what Charles Conroy says Sean told him, and though Charles *did* receive a substantial bill from the Plaza Athénée, the signature on the receipts didn't match Sean's and no one really seemed to know how long Sean was actually in France or even if he had spent real time there" (226).

his facility at knowing what clubs have opened in the past week, charming women and displaying a preternatural sensitivity to all things fashionable. He even appears to have Patrick's ability to say horrible things to little effect. While at dinner "a blond girl close to physical perfection" stops by their table to flirt: "During this encounter Sean is completely rude, yet the girl leaves smiling..." (228). The only thing that separates the brothers Bateman is a matter of degree; Patrick finds himself riven by anxiety and panic beset by the knowledge that, like Owen, Sean is marginally, frustratingly, inexplicably better at everything Patrick prides himself on. Even his desire somehow falls short: "though *I* would fuck this girl, Sean ignores her flirtatious manner and refuses to introduce me" (228). Most dispiriting, however, is Sean's ability to secure a table at the restaurant Dorsia, where Patrick is comically unable to make a reservation. Repeatedly frustrated by the *maître d'*, whose denial of his repeated requests for a table is both capricious and absolute, Dorsia is the one triumph Patrick cannot attain, the one place barred to his otherwise total access. The ease with which Sean makes a reservation leaves him stunned: "My mind is a mess. I don't know what to think or feel... My worst fear—a reality" (225-26).

This blow to his equilibrium is exacerbated in the third encounter where Patrick runs into the aforementioned old girlfriend—Bethany—who lets slip that her new boyfriend is the chef and co-owner of Dorsia. Unhinged by this revelation, Patrick invites Bethany back to his apartment with bloodshed in mind. Ignorant that her fate is already sealed, Bethany makes one last misstep. *Au courant* with the artworld, she informs Patrick that his prized David Onica original of a nude woman watching MTV on a Martian

landscape is actually hung upside down. The piece is a source of pride for Patrick, who earlier in the narrative ostentatiously inflates the price he paid for it—the only form of value which he can relate to, because his aesthetic sensibility is woefully inadequate, composed of half-remembered art reviews and the usual string of non sequiturs that substitute conjunctions for complexity: “Well, I think his work... it has a kind of... wonderfully proportioned, purposefully mock-superficial quality” (99). Bethany’s offhand remark caps what has been a mortifying afternoon for Patrick, who is driven into an utter frenzy because she has inadvertently exposed his failure to inhabit the yuppie ideal, the impossibility of being *GQ*.

Punctuated by the musicology chapter on Whitney Houston, Bethany’s prolonged torture and murder brings the second movement of the novel to a close. The third movement opens in a recursive fashion that is by now familiar. Patrick takes his secretary Jean on a date, but is taken aback when she asks him to take her to, of all places, Dorsia. Unable to admit his inability to get a reservation, Patrick takes her, lies to the maitre d’ and glibly sits at someone else’s table. When the other couple shows up, they are forced to make their escape, leaving Patrick “utterly devastated” as Jean has witnessed the crumbling of his *GQ* façade. Jean, however, takes it all as some sort of uproarious prank: “Your sense of humor is so *spontaneous*” (262). Her failure to realize that she has witnessed a crushing psychic blow allows Patrick to save face. It also suggests that there are no consequences to his actions. Certainly, the positioning of this chapter only a scant dozen pages after he mutilates Bethany’s corpse suggests there is no justice for that particular act, which was prompted, after all, by her Dorsia connection. In the second

chapter, Patrick receives a visitor at the office, a private detective investigating Paul Owen's disappearance. Detective Kimball turns out to be another of Patrick's doubles within the text. "I wave in the detective, who is surprisingly young, maybe my age, wearing a linen Armani suit not unlike mine, though his is slightly disheveled in a hip way, which worries me" (267). Kimball fills Patrick "with a nameless dread," a recurring phrase within the text used to indicate incidents of high anxiety. Kimball's soft interrogation initially threatens to hold Patrick to account for his crimes, it ends in a typically indeterminate fashion. Attempting to establish the chronology of Paul's disappearance, Kimball reveals that Paul had scheduled dinner with Marcus Halberstam on the night of his disappearance (recalling Patrick's pseudonymous reservation) but Halberstam has an alibi—that he was at a club with McDermott and others... *including Patrick*. Kimball's disclosure knocks Patrick into a disjointed consumerist reverie ("What really is the best dry beer? Is Bill Robinson an overrated designer?") as he struggles to absorb this contradictory information. Halberstam's uncanny alibi effectively contradicts what Patrick knows to be true. Far from providing the ultimate acknowledgement in his struggle for recognition, the murder of Paul Owen has succeeded only in nullifying Patrick's sense of self: "My mask of sanity was a victim of impending slippage" (279).

The following chapters oscillate between some of the novel's most horrific set pieces and Patrick's intermittent attempts to rein in his urges. A summer interlude in the Hamptons with Evelyn is briefly idyllic but is followed by a reprise of the Christie/Sabrina episode from earlier, with fatal consequences. Alternating with chapters featuring Patrick's growing inability "to maintain a credible public persona" in his daily routine,

four chapters with either “Girls” or “Girl” in the title showcase his desperate attempts to delimit his own self through the suffering of others. Patrick runs up against the same problem as before since the girls themselves are increasingly nameless and featureless—*unrecognizable*—from one chapter to the next, exacerbating the crisis of his own identity. One girl, for example, is described simply as “the body” even prior to her murder; in the same sentence, Patrick describes “my virtual absence of humanity” and later wonders: “If I were an actual automaton what difference would there really be?” (327, 343). This third movement reaches its crescendo as Patrick, now taking Xanax on the half-hour, turns his victim into sausage but cannot find solace even in cannibalism: “I can’t tell if I’m cooking any of this correctly, because I’m crying too hard and I have never really cooked anything before” (346).³³ The grinding tension finds its release in the final spasm of violence, the “Chase, Manhattan” sequence. Murdering cabbies, cops, security guards, buskers and others, Patrick goes to ground in his office and in one last convulsive attempt to make himself heard over the din of an impending SWAT assault, he leaves a confession on his lawyer’s answering machine. “I decide to make public what has been, until now, my private dementia” (352).

With that, the chapter fades to black and the reader is presented with the puzzling intervention of a chapter extolling the merits of Huey Lewis and the News. The novel wraps up in a strangely indeterminate fashion. The concluding section provides a series of alternating takes designed to refuse to resolve the question of the narrative’s verity. In the first, Patrick stops by his makeshift morgue/trophy room—Paul Owen’s apartment (or at

³³ James Annesley reads Patrick’s cannibalistic turn as the apogee of “a confused consumerism that has run out of control and exceeded all boundaries” (14).

least what he thinks is Owen's apartment—he does admit that the building looks strange and his keys no longer work) and is confronted by an unnerving sight. The apartment has been thoroughly cleaned and put up for sale; at that very moment Mrs. Wolfe, a real estate agent, is conducting a showing.

“You saw the ad in the *Times*?” she asks.

“No... I mean yes. Yes, I did. In the *Times*,” I falter, gathering a pocket of strength, the smell from the roses thick, masking something revolting. “But doesn't... Paul Owen... still *own* this?” I ask, as forcibly as possible.

There's a long pause before she admits, “There was no ad in the *Times*.” We stare at each other endlessly. (369)

Much as in the incident with Kimball, Patrick is left stunned. The agent's ruse with the nonexistent *Times* ad exposes Patrick's culpability, but in a way that hints at her own complicity; complicity in *what*, however, is far from certain. Guilt here is rendered as something diffuse, both non-specific and pervasive. “Patrick Bateman's murders are crimes for which an increasingly commercial and materialistic society must take ultimate responsibility,” argues James Annesley (13). In the final analysis, there is no one to answer to because all are implicated; Patrick's struggle for recognition proves fruitless since even the fact of his guilt proves to be ultimately alienable. “All frontiers, if there had ever been any, seem suddenly detachable and have been removed, a feeling that others are creating my fate will not leave me for the rest of the day” (370).

The unsettling encounter with Mrs. Wolfe sets the stage for the anti-climatic conclusion, where objective verification through third party accounts provides entirely contradictory findings. In the first, Patrick confronts his lawyer Harold Carnes, the recipient of his rambling confession. Asking Carnes whether he got the message, Patrick is unprepared for his response: hilarity. Mistaking Patrick for someone else, Carnes treats

the incident as a joke, albeit one with a weak punchline: “you had one fatal flaw: Bateman’s such a bloody ass-kisser, such a brown-nosing goody-goody, that I couldn’t fully appreciate it. Otherwise it was amusing” (387). When Patrick presses the issue (“I did it, Carnes. I chopped Owen’s fucking head off. I tortured dozens of girls”), Carnes brushes him off with no little irritation. The confession is ridiculous, “Because... I had... dinner... with Paul Owen... twice... in London... *just ten days ago*” (388). Carnes’ startling assertion would appear to decisively undermine the stability of Patrick’s account. Julian Murphet describes this as Patrick’s greatest moment of exposure and shame, one that is typically unavailable to a first person narrator because it is “a moment of objective self-knowledge reached through the mistaken identity of a third person” (48). If the victim (Paul Owens), the perpetrator (Patrick Bateman) and the investigator (Donald Kimball) are all ciphers for one another, can we say that a crime even happened? Just as Carnes provides the seemingly incontrovertible evidence that the narrative is little more than the dark fantasies of a diseased mind, uncertainty again intrudes and this stunning reversal appears vulnerable to its own overturning. Carnes has mistaken Patrick as “Davis” at the beginning of the conversation and “Donaldson” at the end, emphasizing that the *GQ* world is structured according to the logic of substitution and exchange. In turn, this erodes the certainty of his claim that he has indeed met with Paul Owen. In the next chapter, Patrick’s account is once more provided with objective verification, although in this case, what is verified is entirely opposite to the pitiable portrait offered by Carnes. Patrick finds himself identified by his cabbie as the murderer of Solly, a fellow taxi driver and victim of the “Chase, Manhattan” spree. Though that chapter is easily the

most crazed and thus least likely in the entire novel, it is nevertheless authenticated by the cabbie's intervention, which grants some degree of legitimacy to Patrick's narrative as a whole. Instead of turning him in, the cabbie drives Patrick to an isolated location and robs him, reasoning that Patrick is in no position to go to the authorities since he himself is guilty. The claustrophobic logic of *American Psycho* reasserts itself in a typically hellish fashion because, in the end, even the despised "genetic underclass" make out like bandits.³⁴ As Patrick concludes: "This is no time for the innocent" (382).

Finally, Ellis toys with the possibility of Patrick's redemption by opening his eyes to a "new and unfamiliar land." On a date with his secretary Jean at the fashionable bistro Nowheres, Patrick breaks into one of his reveries. This time, however, we are treated to a surprisingly perceptive and *human* assessment of his situation:

... a flood of reality. I get an odd feeling that this is a crucial moment in my life and I'm startled by the suddenness of what I guess passes for an epiphany. There is nothing of value I can offer her. For the first time I see Jean as uninhibited; she seems stronger, less controllable, wanting to take me into a new and unfamiliar land—the dreaded uncertainty of a totally different world. I sense that she wants to rearrange my life in a significant way—her eyes tell me this and though I see truth in them, I also know that one day, sometime very soon, she too will be locked in the rhythm of my insanity. All I have to do is keep silent about this and not bring it up—yet she weakens me, it's almost as if *she's* making the decision about who I am, and in my own stubborn willful way I can admit to feeling a pang, something tightening inside, and before I can stop it I find myself almost dazzled and moved that I might have the capacity to accept, though not return, her love. I wonder if even now, right here in Nowheres, she can see the darkening clouds behind my eyes lifting. And though the coldness I have always felt leaves me, the numbness doesn't and probably never will. This relationship will probably lead to nothing ... this didn't change anything. I imagine her smelling clean, like tea... (378-79)

³⁴ Patrick also runs into the homeless man Al, his first victim, who has capitalized on his mutilation in a way that effectively elides the conditions of his assault. The sign he is holding reads "VIETNAM VET BLINDED IN VIETNAM" (385).

Patrick remains in thrall to his reifying gaze, but is at least able to acknowledge the presence of something *other*. In this case, that something other is the possibility of a gaze not his own. That he can tolerate otherness (“to accept, though not return, her love”) marks a significant step in his evolution; previously his only response was a frenzied, brutal attempt to reduce otherness to the condition of the same. By envisioning how he appears in Jean’s eyes (“it’s almost as if *she’s* making the decision about who I am”) Patrick is momentarily relieved of his existential burden. In contrast to his best efforts, where his increasingly frantic assertions of selfhood are invalidated, Jean’s affirmation provides the answer, at least momentarily, to the cipher that is Patrick Bateman. The chapter ends on a hopefully ambiguous note (at least in comparison to the unremitting terror of the previous pages)³⁵ as Patrick and Jean spy a woman with a stroller: “The baby stares at Jean and me. We stare back. It’s really weird and I’m experiencing a spontaneous kind of internal sensation. I feel I’m moving toward as well as away from something, and anything is possible” (380).

Of course in the next chapter (“Aspen”), Ellis quickly dismantles any hopes the reader may have for Patrick’s salvation by juxtaposing the hopeful interlude with one of utter despair. Jean has been replaced by Jeanette, who Patrick is in the process sending out of the country to get an abortion: “This is, I think, the fifth child I’ve had aborted, the third I haven’t aborted myself (a useless statistic, I admit)” (381). Where the encounter with the baby suggests that Patrick (finally) experiences intersubjectivity, it is a baby’s *things* that emphasize his unremitting brutality: “At the airport I instruct the chauffeur to

³⁵ Tellingly entitled “The End of the 1980s” this chapter posits, if not an outside or a beyond, at least an end to what has been popularly mythologized as the decade of greed.

stop by F.A.O. Schwarz before picking Jeanette up and purchase the following: a doll, a rattle, a teething ring, a white Gund polar bear, and have them sitting in the backseat for her, unwrapped” (381-82). The appalling cruelty of this request effectively negates the events of the chapter previous, leaving us no further ahead than we were before.

“Signatures of his organizing presence”

To sum up so far: The logic of violence in *American Psycho* finds itself hopelessly entangled in intractable conflicts between the story and the plot. The broad affective trajectory which emerges from the latter is relentlessly deconstructed by the former, leaving a narrative that is ultimately contradictory, indeterminate and provisional. Exacerbating the reader’s inability to fashion a coherent narrative from the chaotic discord of story and plot is the fact that there is no stable narrative perspective from which to view the events of *American Psycho*. Early critics condemned Ellis because he refuses to provide an admonitory counterpoint to the cruelty on display; there is no voice of reason within the text because all are implicated and the plot—structured episodically and lacking any identifiable *telos*—refuses narrative resolution and thwarts closure. Instead, as Peter Plagens notes, Ellis “merely winds up a clock of circumstance and lets entropy of the soul run it down” (58). If the continuity of the narrative cannot be attributed to the stability of the perceiving consciousness or to a conventional plot—since *American Psycho* dispenses with the basic tenets of formal realism—what makes it intelligible as a novel? Is there a design evident in this text beyond that of entropy or, is *American Psycho* as its critics charge, a radioactive text, both in the toxicity of its violent

subject matter and the fact that it chronicles nothing more than a state of decay—of a decadent moment in recent American history, of the novel form itself? I would like to suggest that Ellis does establish critical distance from Patrick’s otherwise dominant, indeed, suffocating, voice, but that he does so through a series of subtle interventions that capitalize on the novel’s characteristic confusion of foreground and background.

Ellis’s fleeting authorial presence registers mainly in the form of recurring elements set against the white noise of *American Psycho*’s consumerist backdrop. The first two are scattered in almost equal measure throughout the text: ubiquitous references to the Broadway musical *Les Misérables* and the (fictional) television talk show *The Patty Winters Show*. What makes them stand out in a novel whose dominant aesthetic is one of agglomeration and overwhelming detail is sheer volume: embedded in the narrative are over forty references to Patty Winters and more than twenty to *Les Misérables*. The frequency of their citation makes them one of the few constants in Patrick’s world of endless flux; clearly, they are meant as some sort of gloss on his deranged musings. Crucially, they provide the only implied critique of Patrick’s perspective within the narrative itself (the third and fourth recurring elements, which I shall elaborate on below, carve out an interstitial space in the text that is both part of Patrick’s account and yet separate from it). However, Ellis finds himself in an interesting predicament here. Establishing a counterpoint to Patrick’s voice requires careful negotiation: too little emphasis fails to differentiate it from the background static; too much and foreground and background are effectively reversed to the detriment of the novel, which now appears less as an interrogation of the tenets of formal realism than the total abandonment of them.

The author, in other words, walks a fine line between indulging the private fantasies of a psychotic mind of no relevance beyond itself and a mannered exercise in airless formal experimentation. In either case, the challenge is to fashion a perspective that conforms to the novel's metaphysics, because a critical position implying a point transcendent to the narrative is not in keeping with the claustrophobic atmosphere Ellis goes to such great lengths to establish. The solution is to enmesh a gestural critique within the narrative, one that relies on suggestion over statement and manages to be obvious without being explicit.

The many references to *Les Misérables* provide exactly this sort of implied condemnation of Patrick's vacant gaze, primarily through the ironic juxtaposition of promotional material for the Broadway musical and all-too-real misery of New York's homeless population.

Once outside, ignoring the bum lounging below the *Les Misérables* poster and holding a sign that reads: I'VE LOST MY JOB I AM HUNGRY I HAVE NO MONEY PLEASE HELP, whose eyes tear after I pull the tease-the-bum-with-a-dollar trick and tell him, "Jesus will you get a fucking shave, *please*," my eyes almost like they were guided by radar, focus in on a red Lamborghini Countach parked at the curb, gleaming beneath the streetlamps, and I have to stop moving, the Valium shockingly, unexpectedly kicking in, everything else becomes obliterated: the crying bum, the black kids on crack rapping along to the blaring beatbox, the clouds of pigeons flying overhead looking for a space to roost, the decent-looking babe in the Betsey Johnson dress, all of that fades and in what seems like time-lapse photography—but in slow motion, like a movie—the sun goes down, the city gets darker and all I can see is the red Lamborghini and all I can hear is my own even, steady panting. (113-14)

Patrick is oblivious to any relationship between suffering and spectacle beyond that of simple coincidence. His indifference, repeated *ad nauseam*, fairly clamours for the reader "to interject the moral values so conspicuously lacking in the text" (Young 100). The

frequent invocation of *Les Misérables*, however, offers more than a one-note counterpoint to Patrick's uncritical gaze. Notably, the source text—Victor Hugo's novel—is nowhere mentioned; Ellis's *Les Misérables* floats in the untethered realm of pastiche and the sort of plastic homage paid by Andrew Lloyd Webber. Its deracination is a symptom of the deterritorializing imperative in the free-floating, hyperreal economy. Indeed, *Les Misérables* is dispersed throughout the novel in a variety of forms—posters, playbills, specific productions, and a variety of cast recordings—the profusion of which masks the fact that there is no stable referent (i.e. Hugo's novel). *Les Misérables* circulates in Patrick's world in a ceaseless motion that appears to have neither beginning nor end. Significantly, the closest it comes to being grounded is in the *original* cast recording, which Patrick snatches from Paul Owen's apartment as a trophy. By taking possession of this item (and dispatching its owner), Patrick is now in a position that is infinitesimally and yet absolutely closer to the ultimately unattainable *GQ* ideal—as signified by the proximity of the cast recording to the equally impossible origin of the *Les Misérables* phenomenon.

In an abrupt shift that typifies the novel as a whole, *Les Misérables* all but disappears after the climatic “Chase, Manhattan” sequence. Instead, a vague reference is made to “a new British musical that opened on Broadway last week,” which turns out to be *The Threepenny Opera* (363, 390, 394). If *Les Misérables* and its story of a revolting underclass provided an admonishing intertext to the Patrick's callous disregard of the urban poor, of what significance is *The Threepenny Opera*—which presents bourgeois respectability *as* criminality? Contrary to the theme of redemption that pervades Hugo's

novel, *American Psycho*—in keeping with its controversial ending—refuses the possibility of justice. As Patrick concludes: “no one is safe, nothing is redeemed. Yet I am blameless” (377). This is not so much a denial of guilt on Patrick’s part than recognition that the crime itself has been somehow negated. Despite his best (worst) efforts, his putative misdeeds have proven strangely inconsequential—in no small part because his criminality is as much an indictment of his class and the entire *GQ* firmament as it is a matter of individual pathology. The diffuse nature of guilt in *American Psycho* is emphasized in Patrick’s final encounters with the underclass, who are all too willing to profit from their own victimization and thus bear at least some of the responsibility for it (even if like Patrick they are, strictly speaking, “blameless”). Al the bum, for example, capitalizes on his maiming by claiming to be an injured veteran (385). Like the cheerful cynicism of *The Threepenny Opera*—“The law was made for one thing alone, for the exploitation of those who don’t understand it, or are prevented by naked misery from obeying it. And anyone who wants a crumb of this exploitation for himself must obey the law strictly.” (61, Act 3 Scene 7)—Ellis’s novel concludes by suggesting that the social order itself is built upon a criminal foundation.³⁶

Whereas the constant background presence of *Les Misérables* shows that a stinging critique requires little more than the artful arrangement of the novel’s mise-en-scène, the author comes much closer to showing his hand in the many references to *The Patty Winters Show*. Patrick and his friends watch the talk show avidly; it is a mainstay of yuppie water-cooler conversation. Topics range from the mundane (“aerobic exercise”) to

³⁶ “What’s breaking into a bank compared with founding a bank? What’s murdering a man compared with employing a man?” (*The Threepenny Opera*, Act Three Scene 9, 76).

the informative (“Aspirin: Can It Save Your Life?”) to the sensational (“Teenage Girls who trade sex for crack”) and the utterly bizarre (“Human Dairies”), with the bulk tending towards the latter two (200, 149, 181, 344). For the most part, *Patty Winters* effectively contributes to the verisimilitude of the narrative: the daytime television talk show in its current incarnation—equal parts confessional, supermarket tabloid and consumer advice—came of age in the 1980s. Indeed, by the end of the novel, Patty Winters has moved from her morning timeslot to the afternoon to compete with chat icons Geraldo Rivera, Phil Donahue and Oprah Winfrey. What becomes quickly apparent, though, is that the prurient programming of *Patty Winters* is not simply a matter of setting. It also comments directly on the narrative itself, as a feverish chorus that projects Patrick’s psychic disintegration onto the small screen. Some of the topics appear to foreshadow Patrick’s actions: the show on “Descendants of the Donner Party” (107) and “Toddler Murderers” (138) presage Patrick’s eventual experimentation with cannibalism and his killing of a child at the zoo, respectively. Others are geared specifically towards Patrick’s interests, ranging from the banalities of pop culture (“Has Patrick Swayze Become Cynical or Not?”) to his most lurid fantasies (a two-part show featuring an exclusive interview with Donald Trump and a report on women who have been tortured) (231, 256). Towards the end of the novel his extreme disorientation is exemplified by

back-to-back episodes featuring interviews with Bigfoot (“to my shock I found him surprisingly articulate and charming”) and a Cheerio (381, 386).³⁷

Of all the Patty Winters allusions in the text, surely the most significant occurs as Patrick performs his morning ablutions in the second chapter: “While I’m dressing the TV is kept on to *The Patty Winters Show*. Today’s guests are women with multiple personalities” (29). The topic—multiple personalities—is intriguing, particularly given that it appears immediately after the opening chapter which features the odd interplay between Patrick and Tim Price (especially apparent in the strangely intimate scene in Evelyn’s boudoir). This is only one of many hints that Tim and Patrick may be in fact the same person and that *American Psycho* amounts to little more than the ravings of a disturbed mind. Mysteriously, after entirely dominating the first chapter (“April Fools”), Tim disappears in the fifth (“Tunnel”) and re-emerges only towards the end of the novel. That his re-emergence brings the narrative full circle is explicitly stated within the text: “And, *for the sake of form*, Tim Price resurfaces, or at least I’m pretty sure he does” (italics mine 383). His unexplained absence and uncertain reappearance further destabilizes Patrick’s voice by emphasizing the fictional status of the narrative and also

³⁷ The most savage indictment of Patrick’s behaviour, however, comes courtesy of Oprah Winfrey. After hiring two escorts to serve as expendable players in his theatre of cruelty, Patrick offhandedly asks if anyone had heard of his alma mater Harvard. He is taken aback when one of his escorts answers in the affirmative. She then relates the story of housesitting for a Harvard “business acquaintance” who owned a monkey.

“But there was... something wrong with this monkey.... It would only watch...” she sighs, then in a sudden rush admits, “*The Oprah Winfrey Show* and that’s all it would watch. The guy had tapes and tapes of it and he had made all of them for this monkey.... And you know, you try to turn the channel and that d-damn monkey would try to scratch you” (302).

This bizarre anecdote—which is greeted by “Silence. Arctic, frigid, utter silence”—is easy to pass over since it is quickly followed up by a “hard-core montage” as Patrick engages in a threesome with the doomed women (302-303). Nevertheless, the monkey’s Pavlovian response to Oprah offers a satiric parallel to Patrick’s fascination with *The Patty Winters Show*. By emphasizing Patrick’s unthinking, reflexive response to his surroundings, Ellis provides a fairly pungent critique of Patrick’s abilities as narrator.

suggesting that he is little more than a figment of Patrick's imagination. Making note of a smudge on Tim's forehead, Patrick explains, "I get the feeling if I asked someone else if it was truly there, he (or she) would just say no" (384).

Both *Les Misérables* and *The Patty Winters Show* actively counter the presumed dominance of Patrick's narrative voice from within the narrative itself, thus revealing a hidden order in what first appeared to be mere background static. The third recurring element I will address does much the same, but from an altogether different position within (and without) the narrative. Seemingly written by an enthusiastic amateur musicologist, the three chapters—on such classics of Eighties pop music like Genesis, Whitney Houston, and Huey Lewis and the News—are so at odds with the rest of the novel that they require a careful parsing, a task made difficult by their adoption of a promotional, cliché-ridden language that reads as if it were penned by a junior marketing executive. Genesis's 1986 album *Invisible Touch*, for example, is described as "an epic meditation on intangibility" while Whitney Houston's performs "a joyous ode to a girl's nervousness about whether another guy is interested in her" (135, 253). These chapters intensify the effect created in the rest of the novel by submerging everything—character, setting, plot—under the slick veneer of ad copy. Indeed, we can't even say for certain *who* is narrating these passages. The friendly if frighteningly banal voice sounds somewhat like the Patrick Bateman whose robotic response to questions about etiquette and sartorial dos and don'ts suggests that he is being ventriloquized by the very commodities and (inevitably) consumerist practices under discussion. However, the voice never identifies itself; since there are no interlocutors, no conversation, nor any reference to anything

outside of the stream of musicology itself, we must quickly abandon the possibility of objectively verifying what we are hearing and concretely situating it within the larger plot. Accordingly, these chapters exist in a metonymic relationship with the novel as a whole, which is similarly impossible to verify.

The placement of the chapters within the larger narrative is revealing. While the narrative as a whole adopts the claustrophobic structure of a feedback loop, its division into four sections demarcated by the musicology chapters is characterized by a progression of sorts, one that has more to do with the heightening of affect than linear plot development. Patrick begins each section, if not calmed, than with his anxiety under control (relatively speaking, of course). However, under increasing stress and besieged by epiphanies of “nameless dread,” he is wound ever tighter by until he snaps. The frenetic brutality which results—usually the most graphic scenes in a novel vilified for its treatment of violence as pornography—is immediately followed by another chapter on musicology, which undercuts the violence on the previous pages through the bathetic prose of the ardent pop fan. Doubtlessly, Ellis chose this strategy to insulate his reader from the affective force of such brutal scenes—if not himself. (It would be very difficult to “top” a nauseatingly detailed description of the rape, dismemberment and murder of two women involving a car battery, power drill and nail gun.) This utilization of anticlimax as a recurring structural feature rescues the story from its own insanity by interrupting the increasingly crazed narrative through seemingly neutral and isolated interventions. Respite, however, is only temporary.

The musicology chapters are not solely formal elements within *American Psycho*. Embedded within them are clues that provide an oblique commentary on the rest of the narrative while indirectly glossing Ellis's aesthetic strategy. Crucially, what we are provided with in these chapters is a distillation of the narrator's taste. Very quickly, a distinctive sensibility emerges, one whose valuations tell us a great deal. The musicologist's ability to enjoy popular music as a commodity is predicated on a shallow grasp of musical history and inability to reconcile the music with the circumstances of its production. The music that he appreciates is deracinated, isolated from context both musical and social.³⁸ The speaker, for example, applauds Genesis for their appropriation of both blue-collar and black music. One song is described as being "laid down with a groove funkier and blacker than anything Prince or Michael Jackson—or any other black artist of recent years, for that matter, has come up with" (136); another features an extended jam "by some group called Earth, Wind and Fire" (134) and the Genesis album *Invisible Touch* "has a stripped-down urgency that not even the overrated Bruce Springsteen can equal. As an observer of love's failings Collins beats out the Boss again and again" (136). The speaker repeatedly privileges commercially successful corporate pop music of the 1980s over its "too artsy, too intellectual" forbears: New Wave, punk, and blues (133). The speaker's taste for the inauthentic is also evident in his praise of Whitney Houston, emphasizing that she doesn't write her own material (254).

³⁸ Only a couple of weeks after Simon and Schuster voided their contract with Ellis over the *American Psycho* imbroglio, the author published a long state-of-the-culture piece in *The New York Times*, where, among other things, he discusses the superficial popular culture of the 1980s for "a generation coddled by everyone from Whitney Houston to Tracey Chapman" (H37). "The lack of mystery and the overall non-challenging safety of contemporary music," Ellis writes, "seem appropriately tuned into yesterday's national mood of lazy satisfaction." To give one example from the essay: "Bruce Springsteen's 'Born in the U.S.A.' was mistaken for a populist anthem and, in the single-mindedness of the 1980s, became one" ("The Twentysomethings" H37).

Meanwhile, of the band Huey Lewis and the News, he asserts that they “have a way of energizing clichés and making them originals wholly their own” (358). Above all, the musicologist prefers music made by machines over actual players. The albums released by Genesis during the 1980s are notable, he suggests, because the “music got more modern, the drum machine became more prevalent and the lyrics started getting less mystical and more specific (maybe because of Peter Gabriel’s departure), and complex, ambiguous studies of loss became, instead, smashing first-rate pop songs that I gratefully embraced” (133). Whitney Houston songs are praised because “they emanate warm, lush jazz arrangements but with a contemporary synthesized beat” (253). In “You’re Still My Man” her voice is lauded precisely because it sounds “like an instrument—a flawless warm machine” (255).

Read closely, these chapters also comment indirectly on the plot. Referring to the Houston song “Love is a Contact Sport”, the speaker declares “It’s one of my favorites” (255), a rather grotesque allusion to Patrick’s penchant for sadistic sexual pleasure. His favorite Genesis song, in contrast, is “Man on the Corner” because “it evokes the band’s hopeful humanism.” The speaker’s speculation about just who is the man on the corner (“a bum, perhaps a poor homeless person?”) is striking since Patrick viciously assaulted a homeless man and his dog only two pages previous (134). Other seemingly offhand remarks function as what Julian Murphet describes as signatures of Ellis’s organizing presence (18). The Genesis tune “Who Dunit?”, for example, “profoundly expresses the theme of confusion against a funky groove, and *what makes this song so exciting is that it ends with it narrator never finding anything out at*

all" (italics mine 134). Meanwhile, their album *Invisible Touch* "is about questioning *authoritative control* whether by domineering lovers or by government or by *meaningless repetition*" (italics mine 135).

The Man in the Moon: Robert Ellis, 'Bret Ellis' and Patrick Bateman

Just as the many references to *Les Misérables* provide a sardonic counterpoint to the misery of homelessness in Manhattan in the 1980s and the omnipresence of *The Patty Winters Show* turns daytime television into *American Psycho*'s Greek chorus, the musicology chapters create critical distance within the text through their appropriation of the novel's banal narrative voice, not to mention its redeployment within an indeterminate textual space. Ellis nearly tips his hand here; through these increasingly unsubtle authorial interventions, the reader is provided with clues about the importance of textual strategies such as indeterminacy and repetition. More to the point, the author comes closest to appeasing his critics by making a much longed-for appearance within his fiction for the express purpose of chiding his monstrous creation. Of course, it is an encounter that never comes to pass within the pages of *American Psycho*—perhaps if it had, Mailer and other critics would have been satisfied with the imposition of a strong (i.e. moral) authorial voice to counter Patrick's droning account and reassert the hopeful humanism that is supposedly characteristic of the novel as a literary form. Instead, Ellis remains elusive, offering only mediating strategies that allow the reader to establish at least minimal distance from Patrick's wearying perspective. Recalling John Berger in the epigraph above, this may not be the same as offering a coherent vision (or even a glimpse) of an

elsewhere or an otherwise but it is enough to show that Patrick's brute positivism *is not the whole story*. This brings us, finally, to *Lunar Park* (2005), which provides *American Psycho* with its *authoritative* reading and coda.

Published nearly fifteen years after the scandalized reception of *American Psycho*, *Lunar Park* returns to the scene of the crime. In it, a purported memoir by 'Bret Easton Ellis' (I use scare quotes to distinguish between Ellis and 'Bret,' the protagonist of *Lunar Park*), the notorious author finds himself unable to escape a controversial novel that he wrote years ago. Weary from the frenetic pace of life as a coked-out gadabout, 'Bret Ellis' marries Jayne Dennis, film star, old flame and the mother of his son, Robby. Exchanging the club scene for the lecture hall, 'Bret' settles down with his readymade family in a college town, where he teaches part time while working on his next novel, *Teenage Pussy*. His domestic tranquility is shattered one night with the arrival of Detective Donald Kimball, who tells him that the vicious string of murders he wrote about in *American Psycho* are being re-enacted, that Patrick Bateman is on the loose.

Sitting in my office in front of Kimball, I realized that at various times I had fantasized about this exact moment. This was the moment that detractors of the book had warned me about: if anything happened to anyone as a result of the publication of this novel, Bret Easton Ellis was to blame.... Now it all came rushing back, and I found myself in Patrick Bateman's shoes: I felt like an unreliable narrator, even though I knew I wasn't. Yet then I thought: Well, had he? (122)

Detective Kimball is himself a character from *American Psycho*—'Bret's' failure to remember this odd detail until much later in the narrative is one of the more obvious signals that this memoir is not what it seems.³⁹ The question, then, is what exactly is it?

³⁹ "I forced myself not to be surprised, because it was only the narrative saving itself" (281).

The first and most important clue comes in the remarkable opening chapter where ‘Bret Ellis’ provides a brief history of his literary career. As a narrative frame, this emphasizes *Lunar Park*’s status as a fiction, but it does something else, too. By exaggerating Ellis’s actual accomplishments (e.g. by inflating book sales) and reputation for partying (deftly skewered in *Lunar Park* through the depiction of Ellis’s real-life wingman Jay McInerney as the excessively boisterous ‘Jayster’), the author subtly weaves his biography and his fiction into a tapestry,⁴⁰ which, upon further inspection, consists of a single thread.⁴¹ ‘Bret’ fondly recalls his student days at Camden College in New Hampshire, a curious reminiscence given that the author attended Bennington College in Vermont (5).⁴² Camden is the hub of Ellis’s fictional network, tying all of his novels and stories together into a coherent intertextual universe. A few examples: The events of Ellis’s debut *Less Than Zero* (1985) occur while the protagonist Clay is home in Los Angeles during the winter break of his freshman year at Camden. *The Rules of Attraction* (1987) is a campus novel set at Camden, narrated by a cast of characters including Sean Bateman. It even features cameo appearances by Clay and more importantly, Sean’s brother Patrick (237-240). *The Rules of Attraction* is set in 1985, approximately a year before *American Psycho*—making this Patrick Bateman’s first

⁴⁰ Meghan O’Rourke does a particularly fine job separating fact from fiction in her appreciative review in *Slate Magazine*.

⁴¹ While the argument below suggests that Camden College serves as a figure for writing *as such* in Ellis’s work, it is not the only metafictional element in *Lunar Park*. There is also the matter of ‘the writer’, a voice that intrudes into ‘Bret’s’ scattered thoughts as he becomes increasingly convinced that he is being haunted. The delusional quality that results is certainly in keeping with *Lunar Park*’s horror-novel climax, but it also offers fleeting glimpses of the author himself. For a novel that parodies Ellis as a public figure even as it probes deeply into the traumatic wellspring of his inspiration, the final irony is that the Ellis who appears behind the curtain, so to speak, is completely depersonalized, an anonymous function of the text itself (‘the writer’).

⁴² Ellis’s official website makes this quite clear: www.twobrets.com.

fictional appearance. Meanwhile, in *Glamorama* (1998), the protagonist Victor Ward is another Camden alumnus, as are some of the characters from *The Informers* (1994), a collection of loosely connected short stories—one of which, intriguingly, features Tim Price, Patrick’s erstwhile co-worker at Pierce & Pierce and uncanny double (“In the Islands”).

Camden is simultaneously fictional and yet the sole index of ‘reality’ within Ellis’s fiction because it offers these often unreliable narratives purchase on something outside of themselves—an alternate reality, to be sure, but one that provides consistency and stability for all that. It is the glue that makes Ellis’s fictional universe cohere. By stepping through the looking glass in *Lunar Park*, though, the author both complicates Camden’s fictional status while at the same time clarifying its role within his larger literary project. In the same way that Ellis decided to attend Bennington, a small liberal arts college in the Northeast, *and take up writing* to escape his father, *Lunar Park*’s ‘Bret’ flees to Camden, which condenses these two destinations into one.⁴³ Camden, Ellis finally reveals in *Lunar Park*, is neither simply a fig leaf allowing him to pass off autobiography as fiction nor solely a literary conceit encouraging critics to champion the entirety of his fictional output as a yuppie epic. Instead, Camden is the veil that covers over the traumatic origins of his vocation; namely, his tortured relationship with his father.

Robert Ellis died suddenly in 1992, not long after he inspired one of the more flamboyant acts of symbolic patricide in American literature. The status anxiety, casual violence and unthinking emotional brutality that terrorized his children animate the

⁴³ “The thing I resented most about my father was that the pain he inflicted on me—verbal and physical—was the reason I became a writer” (*Lunar Park* 6).

character Patrick Bateman.⁴⁴ “He remained, always, locked in a kind of demented fury, no matter how mellow the surface circumstances of his life really were. And because of this the world was threatening to us in a vague and abstract way we couldn’t work ourselves out of—the map had disappeared, the compass had been smashed, we were lost,” his son recalls. “We learned from our father’s behavior that the world lacked coherence, and that within this chaos people were doomed to failure, and these realizations clouded our every ambition” (*Lunar Park* 6). Ellis has been on the record about his estrangement from his father since the mid-1990s, particularly in a wide-ranging interview conducted by Jaime Clark. In that conversation, he admitted: “*American Psycho* was my send-off to my dad.” Understandably, he initially downplayed this aspect of the novel (his father was still alive at this point). In fact, during the controversy surrounding its publication, Ellis went to great pains to suggest that the book is not “autobiographical in any sense of the term”; rather, it should be read allegorically as his take on the Eighties as a decade of greed and excess (Love 50).⁴⁵ Since his father’s death, however, Ellis has been increasingly candid about *American Psycho*’s genesis, culminating in his efforts to rewrite that novel within *Lunar Park* by working through (rather than resisting) his father’s toxic inheritance.

⁴⁴ Ellis says that the book is a criticism of the values of his father, values he is unable to “shake off.” One formative episode in particular sheds light on Patrick’s own anxieties about value and status. Ellis recalls that his father used to take him to expensive hair salons ever since he was a young man, as a result, “I still can’t get a cheap haircut” (Clark). In *American Psycho*, Bateman is constantly anxious about his coif, querying friends and lovers when he fears it is tousled or, horror, falling out. In the first chapter, where we are introduced to Patrick and his circle of friends, the presence of two punk “artistes” at a party fills Patrick with a snobbish antipathy and anthropological curiosity. Describing the two, he notes Stash’s noticeably *unslicked-back hair* (unlike the other men in the room) and later dismisses it as: “A haircut that’s bad because it’s cheap” (21).

⁴⁵ In addition to his 1991 *Rolling Stone* interview with Robert Love, Ellis was also profiled in *The New York Times* in the immediate aftermath of the publication controversy, where he explained that his subject was “the absolute banality of the violence of a perverse decade” (Cohen C13).

Lunar Park starts out, like *American Psycho* before it, as a finely observed comedy of manners—although here the action shifts from the city to upscale suburban living, complete with pets, domestics, and children: “all the kids were on meds (Zoloft, Luvox, Celexa, Paxil) that caused them to move lethargically and speak in affectless monotones” (108). Soon, however, it turns into a ghost story. ‘Bret’ is convinced that his father is trying to contact him from beyond the grave. Meanwhile, his dealings with his estranged son, Robby, fill him with disquiet—perhaps because Robby was conceived on the very day when ‘Bret’ discovers that his father has died. Just as his past seems to crowd in on him, so too does his fiction. In addition to the disturbing news that Patrick is back, ‘Bret’ is also being stalked by Clayton, a student at the college who suspiciously resembles Clay, the protagonist of *Less Than Zero*, not to mention his younger self—right down to the manuscript he carries around, “Minus Numbers” (i.e. *Less Than Zero*). Add to all this the obvious Hamlet references (‘Bret’ lives on Elsinore Lane), and *Lunar Park* is quite clearly about generational conflict. If Patrick is the monster the son sees when he looks at the father, than Clayton is the monster that the father sees when looking at the son.

In *Lunar Park*, Bret Easton Ellis lays bare the toxic father-son dynamic that informs and deforms all of his fiction. Displaying a hitherto unprecedented degree of introspection on the part of the author, the novel reveals that his penchant for formal experimentation is as much a matter of anaesthetics as it is aesthetics. The sour depths underlying Ellis’s purposely superficial narratives have finally come into focus. His carefully crafted style—particularly that preternaturally jaded tone—works strenuously to

disavow the very trauma he has spent his career writing *around* (and not *about*). By entering his Camden fiction, though, Ellis can finally reckon with the filial impiety of *American Psycho*, for it is only within fiction that he can resolve his conflicted relationship with his father. He does so by occupying both sides of the antagonism: ‘Bret’ is, of course, son of Robert *and* father to Robby. By providing ‘Bret’ with the wife and, more importantly, *son* that he himself lacks, Ellis can properly mourn his father by *becoming him*, which is to say, by being ‘Bret’.⁴⁶ Moreover, Camden is the only place where the author’s repudiation of Patrick *matters*, where it has a ‘real’ effect. “If I had created Patrick Bateman, I would now write a story in which he was uncreated and his world was erased,” explains ‘Bret’ (282). The story itself is only ever referred to; it is not part of the narrative of *Lunar Park*. Even as Ellis includes himself in, something remains out, resisting closure.

By writing this story, ‘Bret’ triggers the novel’s climax, exorcising the ghosts haunting the house on Elsinore Lane and banishing his demons—but at great cost. The series of murders that initially convinced ‘Bret’ that Patrick Bateman had escaped from the pages of a book turn out to be all too real, a string of copycat killings by crazed fan Bernard Erlanger, who is of course the man claiming to be Detective Kimball.⁴⁷ Clayton, meanwhile, disappears—and Robby along with him.⁴⁸ In *Lunar Park*’s stirring epilogue, Robby resurfaces in Los Angeles, not so much missing as remote, and briefly reconciles

⁴⁶ While famously coy about his sexuality, Ellis “officially” came out in a 2005 profile in the *New York Times*. *Lunar Park*, in fact, is dedicated not only to the memory of his father, but also to Michael Kaplan, his “best friend and lover” whose death was “a big catalyst to finish [*Lunar Park*]” (Wyatt).

⁴⁷ The copycat killer’s name recalls that of Paul *Bernardo*, an excruciatingly literal reader of *American Psycho* who terrorized Southern Ontario in the early 1990s.

⁴⁸ “There was no information suggesting that “Clayton” had ever existed” (*Lunar Park* 300).

with ‘Bret’ on the same day he is ready to perform a final act of filial devotion: scattering Robert Ellis’s ashes. Their meeting is preceded by a recollection of the last time ‘Bret’ saw his father, an encounter where he—unlike Robby—fails to be the forgiving son. “I simply stood up and walked away,” he recalls. “I half smiled at the memory, for thinking that I could just let go of the damage that a father can do to a son” (304). This brings us back to the story that ‘Bret’ writes banishing Patrick, which is a metonym for *Lunar Park* itself. “The purpose of the story was to let myself be carried into the past, advancing backwards and rearranging something. The story was a denial” (283). By denying *Patrick*, both Brets are finally able to let go of the obscene image of Robert Ellis, which in turn frees them from *Clayton*, the equally monstrous image of the son. To that end, *Lunar Park* is about Ellis’s attempt to right his relation with his father by rewriting *American Psycho* and, recursively, his entire oeuvre. In so doing he takes responsibility for his most monstrous creation, but in such a way that *American Psycho*’s signal achievement—the creation of an unverifiable narrative—is retained.

By including himself within the fictional universe of Camden College in *Lunar Park*, Ellis collapses the gap between himself as the author of *American Psycho* and its narrator, Patrick Bateman. This strategy (i.e. making ‘Bret Ellis’ the protagonist of the book) is purely in keeping with what we have come to expect from a writer who is fiercely protective of fiction’s prerogative. But at the same time, Ellis’s character-turn speaks to a newfound intensity: “I could never be as honest about myself in a piece of nonfiction as I could be in any of my novels,” explains the narrator (*Lunar Park* 32). Reading *American Psycho* and *Lunar Park* both with and against each other,

demonstrates how the latter text validates the baroque formalism of the former while simultaneously offering something new: a work of mourning, one that requires a fictional space where the son can properly grieve his father by *taking his place*. For Ellis, who recently came out after the death of his lover Michael Kaplan (co-dedicatee of *Lunar Park*, along with Ellis's father), this remains a supremely fictional gesture because the wife and son this process would seem to demand (and the readymade family that *Lunar Park* provides) exist for him only, "in the pages, behind the covers, at the end of *Lunar Park*," to borrow that novel's closing line. *Lunar Park*, in short, sacrifices none of the formal inventiveness of Bret Easton Ellis's earlier work while texturing his work with a contemplative dimension of queer melancholy.

CHAPTER TWO

Soap Opera or, The Gospel of Tyler

“Sometimes I feel like I’m stuck between being my father and being some kind of animal... What I do for a living—don’t get me wrong, I like it and it’s challenging as hell, but it’s so conventional I feel like I have to stay up all night and beat myself up just so I know I’m still alive.”

—Jay McInerney

“It is in the actual consequences of my act that the truth of my intention becomes visible.”

— Slavoj Žižek

Along the same lines as *American Psycho* in the previous chapter, *Fight Club* presents its readers with an interpretive dilemma. Ostensibly the story of a disaffected yuppie everyman who gets caught up in a revolutionary plot led by the charismatic guru Tyler Durden, Chuck Palahniuk’s 1996 debut turns on the nameless narrator’s dawning awareness that he and Tyler are in fact *the same person*, that much of what he accepted as everyday social reality is in fact the product of a psychotic delusion. In contrast to Ellis’s notorious novel, which from the very first sentence extravagantly flaunts its status as an unreliable narrative, *Fight Club* does just the opposite; the plot consists of the narrator’s increasingly strained attempts to dupe himself. Palahniuk’s minimalist prose and distinctive plotting—distinctive in that it is both fast-paced *and* elliptical—is crucial to *Fight Club*’s reality-effect, which depends on the reader ascribing the narrator’s disorientation to his situation and not to his psychology.¹ Of course, the infamous twist that comes at the climax of *Fight Club* muddies the very distinction between situation and subjectivity. What at first appears to be an objective account is revealed to be a carefully constructed fantasy designed to mask the narrator’s schizophrenic split. Where *American*

¹ On the notion of the reality effect, see Joel Black.

Psycho emphasizes the radical indeterminacy of the *narrative* (of which Patrick Bateman is but a local symptom), *Fight Club* stresses the unreliability of the *narrator*. Put another way, the one element missing from *American Psycho*—the interiority of the first-person narrator—returns with a vengeance in *Fight Club*.

The question, then, of how to read *Fight Club* necessitates a different strategy than the one I adopted in the previous chapter because in Palahniuk's novel the category of fantasy comes to the fore. Unlike *American Psycho*, which is amenable to a careful formal (i.e. literary-critical) analysis of the author's juxtaposition of foreground and background elements precisely because so much of the narrative is pointedly independent of Patrick's dull gaze, *Fight Club*'s narrative is inseparable from its narrator's psycho (patho)logy; here the trickle-of-consciousness of the previous chapter turns into a flood. Accordingly, I aim to explore the fantasy that structures *Fight Club* from a psychoanalytic point of view. The question, of course, is what is this fantasy? At first glance, the answer seems simple enough: Tyler Durden, the narrator's ferocious alter ego. "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 their world. Tyler is capable and free and I am not," the narrator enthuses (174). The answer, though, is far from simple. The salient feature of any given fantasy, suggests Slavoj Žižek, is less a matter of its particular content than the impossible gaze for which it is staged.² "The gaze of an innocent observer," he explains, "is non-existent, since this gaze

² "Apropos of a phantasmatic scene, the question to be asked is thus always: for which gaze is it staged? Which narrative is it destined to support?" (Žižek *Plague* 16).

is the impossible neutral gaze of someone who falsely *exempts* himself from his concrete historical existence” (*Plague* 18).

In *Fight Club*, the impossible gaze belongs to *the narrator* precisely because he imagines himself *watching* Tyler (which is to say, *himself*). To the extent that we do, too, the underlying fantasy goes undisturbed. In other words, one must resist the narrator’s attempt to distance himself from the scene that plays out in front of him, from his disavowal that *he is the one doing these things* (i.e. fomenting a variety of anti-corporate actions ranging from vandalism to violent insurrection). This is exceedingly difficult to do. Palahniuk’s novel is ingeniously structured so as to encourage our identification with the narrator, whose credibility is established by his wry, self-deprecating tone and cynical perspective. The lengths to which he manages to deceive himself (and us) depend on a small miracle of clever plotting and narrative sleight-of-hand. Maintaining this precarious balance presents director David Fincher with his greatest challenge in adapting *Fight Club* for the screen. The 1999 film solves the problem by casting *two* Hollywood stars to play the narrator (Edward Norton) and Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt). This has the effect of visually reinforcing the narrator’s schizophrenic split, presenting it as unproblematically self-evident to the audience. “I’ve had this argument with people who go, Yeah, well, I knew. And I go, Bullshit, how could you possibly know?” recounts Fincher in an interview with Gavin Smith. “We spent tons of money to get two different people to make sure that you wouldn’t know. The point is not whether you’re stupid or smart because you didn’t see it coming, the point is that that’s the realization that this guy comes to” (62).

It is undoubtedly the mark of both Palahniuk and Fincher's achievement in convincingly rendering the narrator's fantasy that so many of *Fight Club*'s critics tend to accept his account at face value (see Giroux, Clark, Thompson). That's not to say they ignore the shocking disclosure that the narrator and his antagonist are the same person—rather that this knowledge hardly seems to register. Whether lauded for its cultural diagnosis (of, say, a crisis in masculinity and/or the toxicity of consumerism) or deplored for its gleeful violence and suspect politics, *Fight Club* was initially treated as a 'social problem' film. Critics dismissed the twist at the end as little more than a gimmick—that is, when they discussed it at all. Henry Giroux's influential treatment of the film is symptomatic of this disavowal. In fact, Giroux suggests that the moment in the narrative when the narrator realizes that "he and Tyler are the same person [signals] a shift in the drama from the realm of the sociological to the psychological" (11). It seems faintly ludicrous to suggest that *Fight Club* becomes a psychological thriller only at the moment when the narrator realizes that Tyler is a figment of his imagination. What of everything up until this point? The widespread sense that the text can be treated as a relatively unproblematic depiction of reality and mined as a source of neutral 'sociological' data *so long as the narrator remains secure in his delusion* is indicative of the extent to which his delusion is a shared one. This is evident even in Giroux's phrasing. Why not: the narrator *is* Tyler? Reliance on the abstract Third (i.e. the narrator and Tyler are "the same person") maintains the very distance that the narrator must eventually traverse.

Accordingly, I contend that the first step towards a critical reading of *Fight Club* consists of suspending its reality-effect and acknowledging the fantasy frame that

structures the text so as not to uncritically reproduce it in the analysis to follow. This requires following through on our initial identification with the narrator. What we first identify with in the narrator—what makes him immediately recognizable and utterly compelling—is the way in which he reflects our own perspective: that of the detached onlooker, the spectator, the audience member.³ Crucially, though, the narrator learns that his position is a fake. Recall that he doesn't consciously fantasize about intervening into his "concrete historical existence" through the spectral agency of his double; the hallucination is designed to distract him (and us) from the fact that *he already is*. The fantasy functions only so long as the narrator disavows his own investment in it by acting as if he were merely a passive bystander observing events when in fact he has set them into motion. The crucial point here is that the effectiveness of fantasy depends on this minimal distance. "In order to be operative, fantasy has to remain 'implicit'," Žižek explains, "it has to maintain a distance towards the explicit symbolic texture sustained by it, and to function as its inherent transgression" (*Plague* 18). The moment the fantasy becomes *explicit*, the gap is closed and its efficiency is suspended. Once the narrator realizes that "Tyler Durden is my hallucination," the fantasy loses its hold over him (168).⁴

The notion of the 'implicit' fantasy is nicely illustrated by what Žižek calls "unknown knows." The term comes from his dissection of former U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's "amateur philosophizing" in a 2002 Defense Department

³ As Žižek points out, "*this very innocence is not innocent*—to adopt such an 'innocent' position in today's global capitalist universe is itself a false abstraction" (*Revolution* 244, italics in original).

⁴ Not immediately, though. *Fight Club*'s denouement consists of the narrator rushing about trying to undo the damage his alter ego has done.

briefing.⁵ (Hart Seely gathered a number of Rumsfeld’s pearls and published them as a volume of “existential poetry”—in the following passage, I’ve adopted his arrangement.

The words are Rumsfeld’s own.)

As we know,
There are known knowns.
There are things we know we know.
We also know
There are known unknowns.
That is to say
We know there are some things
We do not know.
But there are also unknown unknowns,
The ones we don’t know we don’t know. (2)

Žižek seizes upon a curious omission in Rumsfeld’s gnomic text. There is no mention of “unknown knowns”; *the things that we don’t know that we know*. This paradoxical knowledge, he suggests, is nothing other than the fantasy itself. To the degree that it remains ‘implicit’ we are unconscious of it. In contrast to Rumsfeld—whose paranoid vision insists that the looming threat is the one that we cannot even imagine—Žižek argues that the true danger is to be found in “the disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not even aware of adhering to ourselves” (*Organs* 95). So rather than succumb to the temptation of spinning out increasingly elaborate accounts of what we cannot by definition know anyways (i.e. “unknown unknowns”⁶), the critic’s task is to excavate the unconscious beliefs that are all too evident in what we say and do, if not in

⁵ The full text can be found at:

<<http://www.defenselink.mil/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=3793>>.

⁶ In the immediate aftermath of the September 2001 attacks, the Pentagon enlisted Hollywood figures to aid military planners in imagining possible terror scenarios and how to combat them—for an analysis of this episode along the lines I’ve established here, see Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (16).

what we intend.⁷ In fact, Žižek insists, “the risk to be taken is to assume these fantasmatic unknowns” (*Organs* 95). The paradox of unconscious knowledge is that it cannot be *directly* assumed; it is inaccessible to us even as it frames our conscious experience. In *Fight Club*, the unknown known—the unconscious beliefs guiding the narrator’s actions—is Tyler himself, who “has the status of knowledge that can never be subjectivized—that is, can never be assumed by the subject as the truth about himself” (*Žižek Plague* 36). At the story’s climax, when the narrator finally awakens to the fact that he is Tyler, he does not become him—there is no integration of their separate personalities. The narrator is never conscious of himself *as* Tyler. The closest that he gets is the admission that, “I know this because Tyler knows this” (12). What he can do, however, is take responsibility for him. For example, after providing a litany of the woes committed by his alter ego—“The world is going crazy. My boss is dead. My home is gone. My job is gone”—the key moment in the narrative comes when the narrator can finally acknowledge: “And I’m responsible for it all” (193). Before delving into *Fight Club* in order to substantiate these claims, I would like to first turn to its largely hostile reception among critics, where much of the response consistently privileges sociological readings of the text rather than psychological ones.

The Critical Response

Thumbs down. So says Roger Ebert, an influential film critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times* who panned the 1999 film adaptation of *Fight Club*, declaring that it is both

⁷ “It is as if we live in a world in which certain beliefs are in the air, even if no one will admit to having them,” notes Octave Mannoni (78).

“cheerfully fascist” and “macho porn.” Ebert’s review has proven prophetic. His concern with the film’s rather gleeful treatment of physical violence and its depiction of masculine anxiety prefigures the two main lines of critique that have driven the academic reception of David Fincher’s film and, by extension, Chuck Palahniuk’s novel. Indeed, it is quite impossible to discuss the novel without reference to the film. Much in the same way that the prepublication censorship controversy made any ‘innocent’ reading of Ellis’s *American Psycho* impossible, Palahniuk’s novel barely registered among critics until Fincher’s adaptation hit the multiplex. Ellis already enjoyed a critical reputation (not to mention ‘Brat Pack’ celebrity) on the basis of his precocious debut *Less Than Zero* (1985). His sophomore effort—*The Rules of Attraction* (1987)—was widely seen as a step backward, so all eyes were on his third book: would *American Psycho* prove *The Rules of Attraction* a momentary interruption in Ellis’s steady ascent to the literary pantheon or confirm that *Less Than Zero* was a flash in the pan? In contrast, Palahniuk was a virtual unknown, emerging from a career at a truck plant and a series of writing workshops in the Pacific Northwest with a manuscript that went on to enjoy cult status. Crucially, *Fight Club* was groomed for the Hollywood treatment before it was even published. Optioned by Bill Mechanic, an executive at Twentieth Century Fox, on the basis of its galleys, *Fight Club* was made as a \$60 million blockbuster, starring Brad Pitt, Edward Norton and Helena Bonham Carter.

The film’s notoriety did not translate into ticket sales (it prompted a huge critical backlash, in part because its spectacle of ultra-violence followed close on the heels of the Columbine school shooting). *Fight Club* ended up grossing \$37 million in box office, a

miserable showing. However, it rebounded with DVD sales. Today it remains one of the top sellers, even though it has been on the market for six years. *Fight Club* spawned a mini-industry in academia, taught to undergraduates in courses ranging from film, gender and sexuality, consumer society, and beyond. The film has also figured prominently in a number of critical debates, most notably in an exchange prompted by Henry Giroux.⁸ Receiving the Hollywood treatment vaulted Palahniuk into the stratosphere of bestsellers. Even now, though, the author takes a back seat to the director. Most critics of *Fight Club* discuss Palahniuk belatedly, if at all, relegating the author to the hinterland of footnotes. This chapter remedies this omission by considering his style and the inspiration for *Fight Club* in some detail. Regardless, the *Fight Club* I will discuss in this chapter, much like the *American Psycho* of the one previous, is a composite text, consisting of both Palahniuk's novel and Fincher's influential 'reading' of it.

For a film that prompted outrage upon its release in 1999 and ongoing critical debate thereafter, *Fight Club* has been assailed for its glamourization of violence and the poverty of its political imagination while earning praise for its sardonic critique of consumer culture and astute commentary on the so-called crisis in masculinity. Very little,

⁸ Giroux's influential piece (which started out as a co-authored paper with Imre Szeman) sparked a lively debate in the pages of *jac* (see Suzanne Clark, Weiner, Sirc) as well as critical responses from elsewhere (see Edbauer, Gronstaad). The *Journal of Men's Studies* featured a number of articles discussing the depiction of masculinity in *Fight Club* (see Michael Clark, Peele, Tuss, Boon). Their one-note focus, though, has made them of interest more as a symptom of the broader public debate sparked by *Fight Club* than for the acuity of their analysis. Citing it as "a favourite movie of mine" in an interview with Glyn Daly (119), *Fight Club* figures in a number of Žižek's essays ("The Ambiguity of the Masochist Social Link" and "An Ethical Plea for Lies and Masochism") and longer works (*Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, *Revolution at the Gates*). Žižek's ideas, in turn, are central to the readings of *Fight Club* advanced by Bülent Diken and Carsten Bagge Laustsen ("Enjoy Your Fight!") and Krister Friday ("*Fight Club*, Masculinity and the Historical Symptom"), not to mention my own. In contrast to Žižek's emphasis on the ethics of masochism, Glenn Whitehorse critiques Tyler's messianism in terms of Christian, particularly Levinasian, ethics. I should note here that the debate occasioned by *Fight Club* gives short shrift to its author and status as a novel, an omission I attempt to remedy here by paying careful attention to the style of the text. My reading is informed by my interview with Palahniuk, which can be found in the Appendix.

however, has been made of its depiction of madness. This is remarkable, especially since the plot twist that comes at the end of *Fight Club*—that the narrator and his antagonist are the same person, two sides of a split psyche—is nothing short of infamous. Curiously, though, many critics tend to gloss it over, dismissing this revelation as either gimmicky or not particularly germane to their political reading of text. Henry Giroux’s critique of *Fight Club* is representative.

Taking a cue from Ebert, Giroux condemns Fincher’s film as “morally bankrupt and politically reactionary,” going on to describe it as “intensely misogynistic” (17, 18). He charges the director with using a depoliticized rhetoric of anti-consumerism (and spectacular violence) to deflect attention from the film’s cynical appeal to a politics of resentment and backlash. The roots of this argument can be found in an earlier co-authored paper (with Imre Szeman), where the authors suggest that what is most dangerous about films like *Fight Club* is that they make “a superficial gesture toward social critique” that leads into an intellectual (and political) cul-de-sac.

While appearing to address important social issues, these films end up reproducing the very problems they attempt to address. Rather than turning a critical light on important social issues, such films often trivialize them within a stylized aesthetics that revels in irony, cynicism, and excessive violence. (97)

Similarly, Stacey Thompson suggests that *Fight Club*, “critiques for its viewers, providing them with consumable criticism, [foreclosing] on the option that they could mount their own analyses” (63). Fincher’s film, detractors charge, presents something of a Trojan horse by offering critique as commodity and consciousness-raising as mind-numbing entertainment. In short, *Fight Club* both outlines a problem (emasculating consumerism) and poses a solution to it (redemptive violence) but does so in such a deft fashion as to

imply that they are fused together, that criticism of contemporary capitalism begins and ends with commodity culture and that the only response to it is explosive. “The film depicts capitalism and the ideology of consumerism as sutured, impenetrable, and totalizing, offering few if any possibilities for resistance or struggle,” explain Giroux and Szeman (101). As such, *Fight Club* “simply reinforces our sense of defeat in the face of contemporary capitalism by making a regressive, vicious, and obscene politics seem like the only possible alternative” (Giroux and Szeman, 97).

This is a powerful denunciation, but one which rings curiously hollow. It depends on a strangely literal reading of *Fight Club*, one that has generated more heat than light. Without taking into account the narrator’s psychosis, the fundamental rift at the heart of this text, critics commit a category error by assuming that *Fight Club* offers a stable object of critique. As Philip Wegner points out, “any such approach which imagines that the film takes its own vision seriously heals the division that structures both the psyche of its protagonist and its larger narrative vision” (179). In fact, the narrative itself is bifurcated, both in terms of plot and the significance we attribute to it. *Fight Club*, in other words, does manage to have it both ways. It is, as Bülent Diken and Carsten Bagge Laustsen suggest, both subversive and a comedy of subversion, both fascist and a parody of fascism, “both popular culture and avant garde art, both philosophy and pop philosophy at the same time, in the same schizophrenic package” (4). This chapter examines (and maintains) this indeterminability through a psychoanalytic lens. Specifically, I contend that critics have had a difficult time accounting for *Fight Club* because it is a *perverse* text. For example, in one of a series of articles in *jac* responding

to (and repeating) Giroux's condemnation, Suzanne Clark tellingly identifies Tyler Durden as played by Brad Pitt as "the anti-victim" (411). As I will argue below, this is exactly *wrong* because critics like Giroux and Clark misread *Fight Club's* complex and ambivalent rhetoric of masochism, leaving them blind to the way it both enacts and portrays the logic of fetishistic disavowal.

For both Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud, disavowal is rooted in the experience of castration, which the pervert both recognizes and strenuously denies. This is in contrast to the neurotic, who, having accepted the reality of castration threat, represses this recognition utterly and the psychotic, who forecloses its very possibility.⁹ For Freud and his inheritors, castration is neither the unkindest cut nor simply a developmental stage, *but the very basis for the social relation itself*. The neurotic accepts the reality of the castration threat, which is the price of accession to the symbolic order (even if it is an admission that is quickly repressed). Through disavowal, the pervert both accepts and rejects it; perverse fantasies both invoke and defend against the castration threat. This leaves him in conflicted position *vis-à-vis* the social relation, or more specifically, the symbolic order that renders the social relation consistent and intelligible. The pervert, one might say, *knows*, but does not *believe*. He recognizes the necessity of the symbolic order as guaranteed by the name of the father, but *has no faith in it*.

Perversity, then, is not simply a matter of erratically organized pleasures. The logic of disavowal suggests that the pervert is caught fast in a contradiction that he is compelled to inhabit rather than resolve. The psychological torsion is extreme as the

⁹ Lacan explores this in detail in *The Psychoses*. For relevant works by Freud, see "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" and "Fetishism".

pervert oscillates between prolonging and deferring the inevitable. Castration, then, takes up his whole horizon. He can neither accept the reality of the castration threat nor regress to a prior moment where he was innocent of this dreadful knowledge. Accordingly, his activities are directed towards compensation and provocation. In *Fight Club*, the narrator compensates for the malfunctioning symbolic order by attempting to found a social relation based on the masochistic contract (the rules of fight club). Such compensatory gestures, however, afford only diminishing returns, largely because the pervert/narrator knows on some level that compensatory is exactly what they are. Eventually, he abandons his attempt to found an alternative to the symbolic order underwritten by the surety of the paternal metaphor and moves to confront the father himself. In *Fight Club*, the transition from the eponymous clubs to the terrorist organization Project Mayhem is structured as an elaborate dare, a ruse that calls out the heretofore absent father in the hope that he will assume his Oedipal role as a terrifying, castrating figure. The self-abnegating programme of Tyler Durden's space monkeys is offered as a hysterical provocation. Since they don't really trust or believe in the symbolic order, they require a moment of symbolic castration because in the absence of its guarantor (the Oedipal father) they can only imagine that access to it is mediated through a massive disruption; not because they want to bring the system to its knees, but to reassure them that it actually exists.

In this sense, the brutal physical violence in *Fight Club* and its obsessive fascination with scars are exemplary of what Mark Seltzer describes as our contemporary "wound culture": "the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound" (*Serial Killers* 1).

Such bodily spectacles, he argues, speak to more than prurient interest. They attest to the pathologization of the public sphere. A product of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, the public sphere maps out the notional space of civil society. In it, political and market relations between private individuals are regulated through impersonal and abstract forms of mediation (through constitutional and contract law, respectively). This formalism depends on the maintenance of clear boundaries between public and private. When these boundaries fail, the public interest stands revealed as intensely, perversely *interested*.

The pathological public sphere... is everywhere crossed by the vague and shifting lines between the singularity or privacy of the subject, on the one side, and collective forms of representation, exhibition, and witnessing, on the other. Along these lines, the trauma has surfaced as a sort of crossing-point of the 'psycho-social.' The very uncertainties as to the status of the wound in trauma—as physical or psychical, as private or public, as a matter of representation (fantasy) or as a matter of perception (event): these uncertainties are markers, on several levels, of this excruciated crossing. The notion of trauma has thus come to function not merely as a sort of switchpoint between bodily and psychic orders; it has, beyond that, come to function as a switchpoint between individual and collective, private and public orders of things. The wound and its strange attractions have become one way, that is, of locating the violence and the erotics, the erotic violence, at the crossingpoint of private fantasy and collective space. (Seltzer 254)

Wounds mark the breakdown of precisely those distinctions that made the public sphere operative. This is no state of exception, no accident. Wound culture is not a matter of spectacular tabloid excess; rather, wounds attest to an "everyday openness" (2). Wounds and trauma, in other words, are today the very form through which we envision sociality.

It is worth noting here that the idea that wounds are not only experienced socially, but actually inaugurate sociality, is not new. What is Freudian developmental theory if not a theory of the wound? The key to the resolution of the Oedipus complex, to recall, is nothing other than the threat of castration. That it is a threat rather than an actual event is

immaterial, as Seltzer points out above, the wound is characterized by precisely its uncertain status: reality or representation? What I intend to do in this chapter is to utilize psychoanalytic theories of castration as a way of approaching a dimension of contemporary wound culture that Seltzer sidesteps: self-mutilation. If the wound is a mark of sociality, then what does it mean to hurt oneself? Our cultural fascination with wounds evinces an underlying masochistic structure, one that surfaces in the practice of self-mutilation, ranging from the extreme (‘cutters’ and plastic surgery ‘addicts’) to the everyday (tattoos and piercings). Whatever particular wound it is that occupies our attention—whether a psyche torn by the act of confession on daytime television or a sprawled body on the nightly news—points to one wound in particular. As Slavoj Žižek explains: “What the fantasy endeavours to stage is ultimately the impossible scene of castration” (*Plague* 14). By exploring the masochistic aspects of wound culture in *Fight Club*, I will demonstrate that what our fascination with marked and scarred bodies reveals is a *desire for castration*, understood here to be inauguration into the symbolic order by way of submission to the paternal metaphor. This is a crucial point: what is so traumatic about contemporary wound culture is not the wounds that we suffer, but rather the *one* that we cannot quite convince ourselves of, the symbolic cut of castration. Without it, we are abandoned in the realm of the imaginary, haunted by what Žižek calls a “plague of fantasies.”

From the Public Sphere to Risk Society

By hallucinating an opponent with whom to beat himself, *Fight Club*’s narrator inadvertently reveals the “truth” of the post-Oedipal social relation, namely, the

pathological nature of *all* attempts to regain normality and avoid total psychic breakdown. The extremity of his case is quite literally fantastic, but this is precisely what Seltzer has in mind with his notion of the pathological public sphere, which is characterized by the collapse of “psychic and social registers” into an indeterminate fantasy-space much like fight club itself (260). Seltzer is not alone in this diagnosis. In what is perhaps the definitive statement on the emergence and (pathological) decline of the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas—writing in 1961—suggests: “for about a century the social foundations of this sphere have been caught up in a process of decomposition. Tendencies pointing to the collapse of the public sphere are unmistakable, *for while its scope is expanding impressively, its function has become progressively insignificant*” (4, italics mine). What happened to the public sphere? What does its pathological decline have to do with the narrator’s madness? Before going on to discuss *Fight Club* specifically, I want to make explicit the theoretical model guiding my discussion by examining this pathology in more detail. As such, my first task is to provide a brief sketch of the public sphere, particularly of its normative function.

The Habermasian public sphere first appears as the consequence of expanded commerce at the end of the feudal period. Growing trade meant that the private household was supplanted as the locus of economic activity. Depersonalized market relations required public coordination and centralized direction, culminating in the widespread adoption of mercantilist policies among the European powers. This, in turn, imposed financial constraints that could be alleviated only through increased taxation.¹⁰ As a

¹⁰ Habermas remarks of the genesis of the modern state: “the bureaucracy of the treasury [was] the true core of its administration” (17).

result, the private relations between individuals became of increasingly *public relevance* to the vastly empowered state (characterized by permanent and lasting institutions like the bureaucracy and a standing army). This provided the basis for the public sphere, where “private people come together as a public” (27). The new category that results—the “social” (141)—exists at arms-length from state authority. Because the ascendant class of bourgeois could not (yet) constitute themselves as a ruling class, their “claims against the public authority were thus not directed against the concentration of powers of command that ought to be ‘divided’; instead, they undercut the principle on which existing rule was based” (28). Basically, these private individuals came together as a public that was neither strictly political nor solely personal, one that did not formally contest the state’s authority but sought to moderate the substance of its domination by subjecting it to a new standard of legitimacy. “Through the vehicle of public opinion,” Habermas suggests, the bourgeois public sphere “put the state in touch with the needs of society” (31).

The public sphere, then, demarcates a zone of debate and argument “over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour” (27). Hence, the public sphere is subject to a different standard of authority, one based in dialogue rather than domination and conversation rather than coercion. In contrast to the State’s monopoly of force, the public sphere mobilizes a free market of opinion, “the art of critical-rational public debate” (29). For this reason, the public sphere is perhaps best understood not as a positive, substantial entity (i.e. it is not reducible to civil society) but rather as a specific *performative effect*, one characterized by “people’s public use of their reason” (27). I argue that what

Habermas calls the public sphere is nothing other than our awareness of the autonomous function of the symbolic order. According to Lacan, the symbolic is always-already autonomous (which is to say contingent and independent of the Real¹¹), but we are not in a historical position to recognize what he calls “the dimension of the signifier” until a critical mass has been achieved: namely, the development of a bourgeois reading public.¹² Literacy is a necessary but not sufficient condition because this perception remains quite literally impossible until the development of a depoliticized context—a world of letters distinct from the court—where the medium itself takes centre stage. The public sphere with its abstract ideal of “critical-rational” debate and the transformative power of discourse, then, is the model for symbolic efficiency.

The reason for this lengthy excursus on the origins of the public sphere has been to establish the standard against which to measure its pathological decline. Moreover, I offer a parallel between its deterioration and what Žižek, following Lacan, calls the decline of symbolic efficiency, “the performative power of signifying systems” (“Afterword” 305). Following Seltzer, Habermas and Žižek, I contend that the pathology at issue here is nothing other than the absolute expansion of the public sphere itself, which is ‘victimized’ by its own success. Specifically, the public sphere no longer functions as an indeterminate space mediating between public and private interests because it now effectively encompasses both. The ‘globalization’ of the public sphere has the paradoxical effect of suspending its performative efficacy (i.e. its ability to generate

¹¹ See *Encore* (40).

¹² According to Alain Badiou—following Lacan—the emergence of public opinion serves as “the first moment in the constitution of contemporary subjectivity” (*Ethics* 31).

norms) because when it achieves full presence, its symbolic texture disintegrates. What I would like to do now is to briefly historicize this process of conceptual metastasis.

Seltzer dates the emergence of what he calls the pathological public sphere to the late nineteenth century, a period when the dimension of the signifier isolated by “rational-critical debate” is quite literally embodied in material practice. At this time in Britain, for example, Charles Babbage had already designed (if not completed) his analytic and difference engines, thinking machines that applied rules or algorithms to algebraic symbols (Taylor 237). Technology, in other words, substantiates the dimension of the signifier in the form of a calculating machine. At the same time, the body is rationalized as something to be counted, categorized and quantified; it becomes the object of technological mediation and life itself subjected to measurement. What Joan Copjec calls “the new numberlust” of this period is epitomized by the advent of disciplines like demographics and statistics, which arise in “response to the various democratic revolutions which demanded that people be counted” (169).¹³ Both the materialization of the signifier and the signification of the body feed back into one another, accelerating and intensifying the process. Seltzer calls this the *incorporation* “of the technological process and the life process” (33).¹⁴ Taken together, these attest to the profound pathologization of the bourgeois public sphere in that its characteristic element—the impersonal and abstract formalism regulating relations *between* individuals; the dimension of the signifier—is radicalized *in its application to individuals themselves*.

¹³ Actuarial reality, in turn, is epitomized by a new literary genre: detective fiction. “Detectives, in so far as they are rationalists,” suggests Copjec, “are never far from insurance men, claims adjustors”—functionaries like the narrator of *Fight Club* (169).

¹⁴ See Seltzer’s *Bodies and Machines* (1992) for a much more detailed discussion of this coupling.

The statistical accounting of citizens resulted in their normalization by assigning to each citizen a value that was merely the translation of its relation to the others. The modern social bond is differential rather than affective; it is based not on some oceanic feeling of charity or resemblance, but on a system of formal differences. (Copjec “The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal” 175)

Even the body—*especially* the body—is included entirely *within* (‘incorporated’) the process of mediation. This has serious, pathological consequences for identity, which no longer presumes a substantial support external to the public sphere. Instead, it is refracted through a series of identifications with others; indeed, it is nothing other than refraction, to the point that “the strange resemblance among strangers makes self-identity indistinguishable from identification with others” (Seltzer 43). What is pathological about the public sphere today is the absence of non-reflected experience to provide the minimal basis for identity (as opposed to identification).¹⁵ The performative effects of the people’s public use of their reason are diminished by the massive dilation of the sphere of “rational-critical debate,” which has been instrumentalized and subjected to what Žižek calls “the infinity of Reason” (*For They Know Not* xci). The universalization of reflexivity, as I discuss below, brings us to the rise of “risk” society.

Risky Business

Opening high above an anonymous city in the midst of an unfolding terrorist plot to topple the one hundred and ninety-one storey Parker-Morris building, *Fight Club*’s flashback narrative tells the story of the how the nameless narrator came to be held hostage with a gun in his mouth by terrorist mastermind Tyler Durden and his cadre of

¹⁵ I explore this predicament in the next chapter in terms of “collateral crisis.”

‘space monkeys’.¹⁶ The narrator’s story begins innocuously enough. Stricken by insomnia and frustrated with his doctor’s refusal to treat the condition with prescription drugs the narrator takes an offhand suggestion quite literally: “My doctor said, if I wanted to see real pain, I should swing by First Eucharist on a Tuesday night. See the brain parasites. See the degenerative bone disease. The organic brain dysfunctions. See the cancer patients getting by. So I went” (19).¹⁷ Contrary to his doctor’s best intentions, the narrator soon finds himself addicted to support groups, rather than pills. His self-medication consists of attending a variety of church basement meetings and commiserating with perfect strangers (“I never give my real name at support groups”) about conditions he does not share. By faking a variety of illnesses, he basks in the empathy of “everyone who smiles with that invisible gun to their head” (19). This may have remained an exercise in voyeurism if not for Remaining Men Together, a testicular cancer support group. In contrast to earlier encounters, the narrator finds himself incapable of maintaining his detached attitude from the spectacle in front of him. I argue that it is not so much Remaining Men Together as it is a specific figure: Bob, a former bodybuilder whose steroid abuse has left him with “bitch tits” (21). Caught fast in Bob’s maternal embrace, the narrator finally lets himself go and cries. By actively participating in the therapeutic process rather than cynically observing from a distance, the narrator discovers that “losing all hope was freedom. If I didn’t say anything, people in a group assumed the

¹⁶ Krister Friday provides an excellent discussion of *Fight Club*’s narrative structure and the paradoxical temporality of the flashback in particular.

¹⁷ No doubt, this portrait of self-help culture has much to do with Palahniuk’s experience as a hospice volunteer where, among other things, he escorted terminally ill patients to their therapy sessions. See “Escort” in *Stranger Than Fiction* (2004).

worst. They cried harder. I cried harder. Look up into the stars and you're gone" (22).¹⁸

Hitting bottom, as the narrator describes his teary encounters with Bob's bosom, becomes a weekly ritual as it holds his insomnia at bay.

The question, of course, is why does the narrator suffer from sleeplessness in the first place? While insomnia is coded in the film adaptation of *Fight Club* as the privileged expression of consumerist ennui (dramatized nicely by Edward Norton, who portrays the bleary narrator as a listless channel surfer), the novel ties it much more closely to his job; more specifically, as the psychosomatic expression of *guilt*: "this week, we're doing a recall campaign. And this week the insomnia is back" (96). He works as a recall campaign coordinator at one of the 'Big Three' automotive manufacturers. His job consists mainly of applying the formula:

If a new car built by my company leaves Chicago traveling west at 60 miles per hour, and the rear differential locks up, and the car crashes and burns with everyone trapped inside, does my company initiate a recall?

You take the population of vehicles in the field (A) and multiply by the probable rate of failure (B), then multiply the result by the average cost of an out-of-court settlement (C),

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 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.

Everywhere I go, there's the burned-up wadded-up shell of a car waiting for me. I know where all the skeletons are. Consider this my job security. (30-31)

The abstract logic of the formula is as breathtaking in its simplicity as it is chilling in its implications. The only restraint keeping his company from putting faulty vehicles on the road has less to do with safety concerns than it does with indemnity. In calculating this

¹⁸ The narrator's prior experiences are hardly as cathartic—as he hugs one woman, who suffers from brain parasites, "I watched the second hand on my watch go around eleven times" (20).

formula, the narrator functions as the all-too-real corollary to the invisible hand of the market. As its representative, his decisions are experienced by “everyone trapped inside” the doomed vehicle as the operation of blind necessity, fate (i.e. they are doomed by the formula itself). It is no wonder he seeks relief in the company of the terminally ill—they are as condemned as any of the people who climb into one of the cars deemed an acceptable statistical risk. Establishing some sort of direct (if anonymous) rapport with them provides his cripplingly pervasive sense of guilt with a focus. The narrator’s breakthrough with Bob, his ability to open up and cry—dissolving the psychological deadlock that manifests as insomnia—is cued by a startling epiphany: “It’s easy to cry when you realize that everyone you love will reject you or die. *On a long enough time line, the survival rate for everyone will drop to zero*” (17, italics mine). By expressing his own mortality in precisely the language of pseudo-objectivity as befits his actuarial function, the narrator literally *accounts* for himself. Paradoxically, it is only when he can account for his own subject position that he becomes truly objective; what was “pseudo” about his initial objectivity was that it served as a consoling fantasy: that he is nothing other than a programmed automaton performing his function (which is quite simply to apply the inhuman formula).¹⁹

What is so attractive about a fantasy of powerlessness and impotence? The narrator’s passivity in effect absolves him of responsibility for his ‘crime.’ This disavowal is one way of evading the crippling guilt and pervasive anxiety endemic to life in a ‘risk

¹⁹ The story comes full circle as the narrator performs a series of increasingly risky activities designed so that he can “hit bottom”—culminating in an intentional car accident, what one of his followers calls “A near life experience” (148). By placing himself in harm’s way, the narrator transcends the initial identification borne of empathy for the suffering of others; having faced death he can relate to himself *as* other. Put another way, he no longer simply knows where the skeletons are hidden; he is now one of them.

society'. The term comes from German sociologist Ulrich Beck, who suggests that today we are "living in the *age of side effects*"—the greatest risk that we face is the one we pose to ourselves (*Risk Society*, 175 italics in original). In the past, Beck argues, risks were the direct result of *not enough* modernization (of improper scientific understanding, inadequately developed productive forces, etc.). For example, the great threat to our health in the past was due to a dearth of hygienic technology. Today, however, risks result from *over*production—the oversupply of antibiotics (which are both excessively prescribed by doctors and also enter the food chain at multiple points unbeknownst to the average consumer) has prompted the spread of superbugs resistant to the usual course of treatment. Alongside Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, Beck has formulated the notion of reflexive modernization, the idea that "the more societies are modernized, the more agents (subjects) acquire the ability to reflect on the social conditions of their existence and to change them in that way" (*Reflexive Modernization*, 176). Reflexivity inaugurates an era of opacity; life has become so complicated, so complex, that it is effectively impossible to establish the relation between cause and effect. However, this is more than a matter of unintended consequences. Reflexivity also acts a force multiplier:

The triumphant procession of the industrial system causes the boundaries between nature and society to become blurred. Accordingly, destructions of nature can no longer be shifted off onto the 'environment' either, but as they are universalized by industry, they become social, political, economic and cultural contradictions inherent in the system. (Beck *Risk Society* 154)

Once the modernization process has reached a physical limit (i.e. once it has successfully englobed the world), it turns on itself and takes modernization as its object, the modernization of modernization. This, of course, hews closely to Fredric Jameson's

discussion of postmodernism, which “is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good. It is a more human world than the older one, but one in which ‘culture’ has become a veritable ‘second nature’ (*Postmodernism*, ix).²⁰ If nature served as the object of the ‘first’ modernization process, reflexive modernization displaces this attitude inward: the ‘dark continent’ of second nature is nothing other than ourselves; one only has to consider the possibilities of genomic mapping and genetic testing as precisely this sort of radical self-objectification.²¹ Reflexivity, then, engenders a new category of risks where the threat is no longer external to society but emerges from within. Consequently, these risks are *out of all proportion* to the old. “By their nature [these risks] endanger all forms of life on this planet. The normative bases of their calculation—the concept of accident and insurance, medical precautions, and so on—do not fit the basic dimensions of these modern threats,” Beck writes. “Atomic plants, for example, are not privately insured or insurable. Atomic accidents are accidents no more... They outlast generations” (*Risk Society* 22).

In the face of these potentially catastrophic emergencies, the only sensible attitude is one of existential (or as *American Psycho*’s Patrick Bateman would put it, nameless) dread. This encompasses a wide range of affective responses: anxiety, guilt, rage, and even ecstatic abandon. In this sense, dread is akin to the modernist notion of anomie. The disorienting experience of progress (due to technological acceleration and the erosion of tradition) suggests that the modernization process counts among its innovations a

²⁰ Palahniuk reflects on this experience of ‘second’ nature in one of his occasional pieces. “More and more, the *bestand* [raw natural resources] of our era is our own intellectual property. Our ideas. Our life stories. Our experience.” (*Stranger Than Fiction* 32)

²¹ For a sustained discussion of the implications of this argument, see Žižek’s *On Belief*.

characteristic way of *feeling*. No doubt this is due to the challenges it poses to *thinking*. Reflexive modernization makes it impossible to properly forecast the collective outcome of individual actions. This impenetrability is all too often accompanied by the suspicion that everything is connected.²² The nature of specific connections, however, remains shrouded. It is, to paraphrase Henry James (in a slightly different context) a world of “bottomless superficiality” (Fraser 260). Part of the challenge to navigating through this confusing new world is not simply the increasing complexity of social relations, but that the old maps no longer serve to describe these territories. The symbolic authority of Tradition, dissolved by the logic of development—“all that is solid melts into air”²³—reappears in the unlikeliest of places. In our increasingly globalized, secular and post-traditional world, there is no guarantor of one’s actions: no God, no Father, no Church, no State. The inheritor of these institutions and creeds is none other than the sovereign individual, who paradoxically experiences the newfound freedom from tradition as a heavy cross to bear.²⁴

In contrast to Beck and Giddens, who have provided us with a *sociology* of risk society, Slovenian philosopher and Lacanian theorist Slavoj Žižek repeatedly returns to the question of its *psychology*, particularly in *The Ticklish Subject* (1999). Liberated from Nature (“the permanent foundation and resource of our activity”) and Tradition (“the

²² On conspiracy theories and paranoia in contemporary American culture, see Jameson, Knight, O’Donnell, and Melley. For a study of paranoia’s relation to masculine identity, see Paradis.

²³ For an influential discussion of Marx and the logic of development, see Berman.

²⁴ The previous chapter has already discussed the paradoxes of consumerism at length: freedom of choice is hardly edenic—instead it manifests as a dreadful compulsion *to choose*.

substantial form of customs that predetermine our lives”), those of us indigenous to risk society experience an entirely new form of necessity:

[Far] from being experienced as liberating, this compulsion to decide freely is experienced as an anxiety-provoking obscene gamble, a kind of ironic reversal of predestination: I am held accountable for decisions which I was forced to make without proper knowledge of the situation. (*Ticklish* 338)

The burden of reflexivity, explains Sarah Kay, is “that the absence of coherent directives in the society around us is reflected back into us as a requirement individually to assume responsibility for our own self-fashioning” (141). This radical self-reliance generates a terrifying sense of pervasive, yet non-specific guilt. As Anthony Giddens suggests, “[the] day-to-day actions of an individual today are globally consequential” (1994, 57). In some obscure way, potential catastrophes like global warming or pollution are attributable to (the sum total of) individual actions. However, since it is impossible to ascertain the degree of individual liability, responsibility is experienced less as a matter of pragmatic calculation than as metaphysical sin. In *Fight Club*, the narrator’s job—applying the formula—reveals the conceptual inadequacy of indemnity in a risk society. This is not to make a simplistic anti-corporate argument (i.e. the narrator’s employer—and by extension, the narrator—is guilty of putting profits before people). Rather, it is to suggest that in a world where the unintended consequences of our own actions more and more appear to us as the operation of blind Fate²⁵, indemnity cannot compensate for the existential losses that are glossed over by the language of failure rates.

This crisis in the concept of indemnity results from what Žižek describes as the “nonexistence of the big Other” (*Ticklish*, 338). In Lacanian terms, the big Other is the

²⁵ Specifically, “anonymous Destiny in the guise of market relations” (Žižek *Ticklish*, 339)

locus of symbolic authority; it renders our symbolic universe both meaningful and consistent. Its authority is based on the supposition “that there is something additional to the symbolic order which props it up” (Kay 159). Historically, that supplement has been provided by Nature or Tradition. The disappearance or decline of both in a society dominated by the logic of reflexivity means that we no longer have a solid foundation to ground our actions (that is, if we ever did). As Žižek notes, “there is no one who ‘really knows’ the global outcome—on the level of positive knowledge, the situation is radically ‘indecidable’; but we none the less *have to decide*” (1999, 337). Without recourse to just such a big Other, indemnity undergoes a sea change; the security it offers stems from the reflected character of contemporary society itself (i.e. the pooling of risk). We no longer seek protection from acts that happen to us from outside (i.e. acts of God) by way of appeal to a similarly externalized guarantor. Instead, we are forced to take responsibility for our own decisions. And in a reflected world, all contingencies—even if they do not at first appear that way—are ultimately the acts of man.

The narrator of *Fight Club* is haunted by just such a contingency: the car wrecks unerringly predicted by his formula. Initially they appear to him as nothing other than grim fate. Gradually, though, he comes to recognize his own implication in something that can no longer be considered an accident. Indeed, as Beck notes, in a risk society there are no more accidents. According to the logic of reflexivity, there are only unintended consequences—an accident is experienced as something *that has happened to us*, as opposed to something in which we have colluded, however obscurely. And without accidents, there are only crimes. It is only by taking responsibility for his existential guilt

that the narrator is finally able to abandon his position of pseudo-objectivity. There is no significant outward change in his behaviour. He still goes to work each day, still applies the formula. What has changed, however, is “*the way this content is related to the subjective position implied by its own process of enunciation*” (Žižek *Metastases* 8, italics in original). The narrator no longer applies the formula from a position of cynical detachment since he is finally able to account for his own position within it. His knowledge (“I know where all the skeletons are”) is no longer debilitating, since real losses can be mourned as the unforeseeable consequences of individual decisions rather than plotted abstractly as statistical events. This epiphany, of course, hinges on Bob’s intervention. Sobbing into his chest provides the release that allows the narrator to “let go,” to accept something he had formerly only suspected: the nonexistence of the big Other. At peace in Bob’s bosom, he can finally acknowledge that, “nobody is in charge, that there is no such power,” as Žižek puts it, “pulling the strings” (*Ticklish* 336). Ultimately, his insomnia alludes to an underlying pathology: the universalization of guilt in a risk society.

Marla

By learning how to ‘let go’ the narrator abandons his position of cynical detachment. Paradoxically, he does so by learning how to take personal responsibility for the diffuse guilt engendered by reflexivity. Through his encounters with Bob, the narrator resolves his symptom: insomnia. If the story were to end there, it would make for an interesting parable about postmodern ennui and perhaps not much more. His position,

however, remains fraught. ‘Letting go’ depends on a voyeuristic perspective—complete identification is hindered because he is not really sick. Nonetheless, the narrator maintains his precarious balance for two years, until the sanctity of his church basement retreat is rudely interrupted. Marla, “skim milk thin, buttermilk sallow,” starts to show up at all of the narrator’s favorite groups, from melanoma to brain parasites and, to his seething indignation, Remaining Men Together. Her all-too-apparent voyeurism (she is clearly not a victim of testicular cancer) uncomfortably mirrors his own. Voyeurism, of course, depends on a disembodied viewpoint of fantasy. The eye, however, cannot watch itself and the person occupying this position of the Gaze is made acutely uncomfortable when subjected to inspection: “Marla’s lie reflects my lie, and all I can see are lies. In the middle of all their truth” (23). Stricken with self-consciousness, the narrator cannot let go and, without a cathartic sob, the insomnia returns.

Marla’s disturbing presence intrudes on more than the boys-only atmosphere of the narrator’s favorite group. She has unwittingly interrupted a fantasized scene of maternal male plenitude. For the narrator, Remaining Men Together is at once a motley assortment of cancer survivors and an idealized male fellowship, one that is based on an ethic of care, nurturing, and mutual support alien to the competitive individualism that defines masculinity outside the confines of the group (Peele). Once again, Bob is the pivotal figure. Though it is never stated explicitly, one suspects rather strongly that the narrator’s ability to ‘let go’ and weep has more to do with Bob’s busty embrace than it does with the brotherhood of suffering. Bob’s breasts make him both Mother *and* Brother, the unification of masculinity and femininity within a still recognizably male body.

Remaining Men Together is thus homogenized, a pure space where difference, namely sexual difference, is banished in the name of identity. As such, the anxiety generated by Marla's entrance—"I watch her from between Bob's shuddering tits" (23)—suggests that the narrator is worried about far more than being found out as a fraud. Her very presence dispels the (fascistic) illusion that a collectivity can be made seamless, that the knot of sexual difference can somehow be unwound.²⁶

Boiling with rage at Marla's intrusion into his fantasy space, the narrator rehearses any number of confrontations with her, but instead meekly agrees to split the groups between them: "Marla can have bone disease, brain parasites, and tuberculosis. I'll keep testicular cancer, blood parasites, and organic brain dementia" (38). Their relationship, much like the flashback narrative itself, begins at the end: the narrator and Marla resemble nothing other than a divorced couple squabbling over the disposition of assets. Only after the details have been ironed out, does the narrator note, "This is how I met Marla" (39). Ironically, another chance meeting renders all their haggling over the groups superfluous. For it is around this time that the narrator meets Tyler Durden, with whom he starts a new support group: fight club.

"The first rule of fight club..."

The meeting with Tyler is a happenstance affair in both the novel and the film, though they take divergent approaches toward it. In the novel, the narrator encounters

²⁶ Klaus Theweleit's two-volume study *Male Fantasies* documents in exhaustive detail the myriad ways in which Nazi and proto-Nazi (Freikorps) ideology vigorously policed masculine identity through the abjection of 'effeminacy'. *Fight Club* offers some disturbing parallels, particularly in terms of the narrator's relation with Marla (not to mention Marla's mother) that certainly call for further research but which are ultimately beyond the scope of my discussion.

Tyler while napping on an otherwise deserted nude beach, a setting calculated to imbue their relationship with an erotic undertone that is muted, though not absent, in the film. Fincher's version stages this initial meeting aboard an airplane—the narrator awakens abruptly to discover Tyler sitting next to him. He strikes a sharp contrast to the anodyne narrator, who is intrigued by Tyler's gnomic responses to the banalities reserved for his 'single-serving friends' (i.e. the forced intimacy of seatmates settling in for a long flight). What elevates a slight acquaintance borne out of a chance encounter into a close partnership is a seemingly random act of senseless violence: the narrator's condo is bombed and he is left homeless. Calling Tyler, they agree to meet at a bar, where Tyler invites the hapless narrator to crash at his place, on one condition: "I want you to hit me as hard as you can" (46).

Tyler's striking request is the first step towards the formation of fight club, a parody of—and alternative to—the "therapeutic physical contact" on offer at the various support groups frequented by the narrator (191). Fight club consists of the narrator, Tyler, and an anonymous roster of young men, who all take part in bareknuckle boxing matches. Though brutal, these fights are highly structured affairs, as codified in the rules of engagement: "The first rule of fight club is you don't talk about fight club," the narrator says. "The second rule of fight club is you don't talk about fight club..." (48).²⁷ What is most interesting about these rules is that they are the very basis for *Fight Club*. In the new introduction to his first novel, Chuck Palahniuk describes its origins as a short story:

²⁷ He goes on to list the rest: "when someone says stop or goes limp, even if he's just faking it, the fight is over.... Only two guys to a fight. One fight at a time. They fight without shirts or shoes. The fights go on as long as they have to. Those are the other rules of fight club" (49).

It was just an experiment to kill a slow afternoon at work. Instead of walking a character from scene to scene in a story, there had to be some way to just—cut, cut, cut.... There had to be some kind of chorus. Something bland that wouldn't hold the reader's attention, but would act to signal a jump to a new angle or aspect of the story.... So for that chorus—that 'transitional device'—I wrote eight rules. The whole idea of fight club wasn't important. It was arbitrary. But the eight rules had to apply to something, *so why not a club where you could ask someone to fight? ... The fighting wasn't the important part of the story. What I needed was the rules.* (xv)

Fight Club, in other words, was originally conceived as the solution to a formal problem, not as social criticism. This is a rather startling admission, especially given the garlands Palahniuk has since received as the diagnostician of a contemporary masculine crisis and consumerist ennui. It also says a great deal about his literary style, which is rarely discussed *as a style*, likely because it is so deliberately underwritten.

Palahniuk favours short, direct sentences—no surprise given the preponderance of dialogue in his fiction. Even when the characters aren't speaking to each other, the narration has the immediacy of direct rather than reported speech because it often resorts to the second person. This has the effect of turning declaratives into imperatives, drawing one deeper into the increasingly 'consensual' fiction by tacitly making the reader part of the conversation.²⁸ Pulling back from the infrastructure of sentence structure, Palahniuk's distinctive voice can be located in transitional devices like the rules of fight club. His other books are similarly arranged; any given page can read like the Anarchist's Cookbook, an advice column, a product manual, handy cleaning tips or an etiquette lesson. Taken as a whole, Palahniuk's fiction seems to offer something like a postmodern almanac, where the careful organization of pop cultural detritus offers readers perspective

²⁸ Palahniuk discusses the "consensual nature of books" in my interview with him. See Appendix (403).

on the present. “That’s my job now,” the author writes. “To assemble and reassemble the stories I hear until I can call them mine” (*Fugitives* 175). Taken singly, each novel features a thematically coherent set of “non-fictional forms” to provide the scaffolding on which Palahniuk hangs his short comic scenes and the unobtrusive means by which he navigates through them. Curiously, though, one could also argue that these devices serve a pedagogical function—they teach the readers *how to read*. Their very form seems calculated to instruct. It has been said (by supporters and detractors alike) that Palahniuk’s fiction appeals to those who don’t read. A very plausible reason for his popularity is that these irregular readers respond to direction. In *Survivor*, for example, the narrator works as a servant. The plot advances almost imperceptibly amidst a flurry of domestic suggestions: “For tear stains in a pillow case, treat them the same way you would a perspiration stain. Dissolve five aspirin in water and daub the stain until its gone. Even if there’s a mascara stain, the problem is solved. If you could call it solved” (263).

Beyond the transitional devices that mark the passage from one scene to the next, each of Palahniuk’s books adopts a different overall frame for the narrative. Though he turns to more recognizable genre codes in his recent work (horror), his early fiction evades genre classification entirely. While Palahniuk is quick to credit other writers on the matter of style, these early narrative structures are inspired by decidedly non-literary sources. *Invisible Monsters* is meant to read like “a fat fashion magazine,” Palahniuk suggests. “All those stylized images and the hyperbole of the language. The pages were never numbered, and those articles always jumped from page to distant page” (Appendix 396-97). Other works adopt contemporary variants of oral storytelling—*Choke* features a

sex addict stuck on his fourth step (“personal inventory”) of a twelve-step program while *Survivor* is told to the black box of a hijacked airliner. At times, this has encouraged some critics to dismiss his writing as sophomoric, a judgment that tends to focus on the visceral immediacy of his prose rather than his deployment of non-traditional narrative modes, not to mention his complicated, recursive, yet nonetheless effective plotting. I’d like to suggest that this is something of a category error (one similar to the tendency among critics to treat Fincher’s film adaptation of *Fight Club* as a relatively unproblematic reflection of reality). It fails to recognize that Palahniuk’s fiction is more concerned with cultural forms of *literacy* than with being *literary*. In *Fight Club*, however, the rules are more than signature elements of Palahniuk’s style. They are crucial to understanding the perverse / masochistic logic of the text, to which I’ll now turn.

“The second rule of fight club...”

The rules of fight club serve two distinct purposes. The bulk of them regulate the conduct of the fight, with less emphasis on fairness (pretty much anything goes) than safety. The violence, if brutal, is consensual. In this sense, fight club seems less like a fraternity of extreme sports devotees crazed with testosterone than an S&M community, with its emphasis on procedure, rules and (as we shall see below) the masochistic contract. Surely, though, it is no small matter that the first two rules of fight club are singular in their purpose: the creation of a fantasy space that is private, anonymous and, most importantly, *secret*. “Who guys are in fight club is not who they are in the real world,” the narrator explains, adding, “You don’t talk about fight club because except for

five hours from two until seven Sunday morning, fight club doesn't exist" (49, 52). On one level, fight club's phantom presence evokes the atmosphere of another weekly ritual: the deeply affecting yet anonymous "support" offered through therapy groups. On another, it is coterminous with the narrator's awareness of Tyler Durden, his hallucinated alter ego. Though they share the same body, it is only by seeming chance that they "meet." And once they do, they require the fantasy structure of fight club to renew their acquaintance. Fight club, in other words, provides an excuse for the narrator and his imaginary double to be together at the same time. The first two rules, then, carve out a space where the narrator can paradoxically inhabit both sides of a contradiction *simultaneously*. It is crucial that this fantasy space go undisturbed otherwise Tyler retreats into the narrator's subconscious, inaccessible, and orchestrates the action from off-stage. When the fantasy is threatened, the narrator falls asleep, a protective narcolepsy that allows his double to operate unhindered. "Every time you fall asleep," Tyler says, "I run off and do something wild, something crazy, something completely *out of my mind*" (163, italics mine). As the narrator sums up, "We both use the same body, but at different times" (164).

The mania for secrecy and repetition evident in the first two rules of fight club ("you don't talk about fight club") are bested in the narrator's personal dealings with Tyler, who forces him to "promise never to talk about me behind my back" and extracts this pledge *three* times (72). In the event the narrator does betray the confidence, his imaginary friend threatens to disappear entirely. This exchange is occasioned by the reappearance of Marla, who is drawn back into the narrator's orbit after his absence from

the compassion tourist circuit. In a sequence that is played to great comic effect in the film, the narrator believes Marla is having an affair with Tyler, while she, of course, doesn't know that there is a difference between them. And Tyler can't have the narrator talking about him to Marla, since his disassociative state would be painfully evident. Secrecy rules the day as the narrator works frantically to maintain the precarious balance essential to deluding himself. In the end, the reality that threatens to intrude into the narrator's elaborately organized fantasy is nothing other than the fact that he and Tyler *are the same person*. The question, then, is why does he go to such lengths to disavow his own identity?

The psychoanalytic concept of fetishistic disavowal goes a long way toward explaining Tyler Durden's curious predicament. According to both Freud and Lacan, disavowal is a specific defensive formation, one that differs from other psychic defense mechanisms. Unlike psychotic foreclosure or neurotic repression, disavowal is a *perverse* response to the traumatic perception of castration. Instead of foreclosing its very possibility or repressing the knowledge of it, the pervert enjoys a peculiarly ambivalent relation to castration. The pervert refuses to accept the traumatic perception *as real*. He perceives castration while simultaneously "seeing" the very object that fills in the void: the phallus, the symbolic substitute for the mother's "missing" penis. Fetishistic disavowal, then, is a form of double vision that both invokes and defends against the threat of castration.

[The pervert]²⁹ replies to the conflict with two contrary reactions, both of which are valid and effective. On the one hand, with the help of certain mechanisms he

²⁹ In the original, Freud refers to a small child, not a pervert. That being said, what is of interest here is the perverse strategy utilized to manage the conflicting demands of prohibition and satisfaction.

rejects reality and refuses to accept any prohibition; on the other hand, in the same breath he recognizes the danger of reality, takes over the fear of that danger as a pathological symptom and tries subsequently to divest himself of that fear. It must be confessed that this is a very ingenious solution of the difficulty. Both of the parties to the dispute obtain their share: the instinct is allowed to retain its satisfaction and proper respect is shown to reality. But everything has to be paid for one way or another, and this success is achieved at the price of a rift in the ego which never heals but which increases as time goes on. The two contrary reactions to the conflict persist as the centre-point of a splitting of the ego. The whole process seems so strange to us because we take for granted the synthetic nature of the processes of the ego. But we are clearly at fault in this. The synthetic function of the ego, though it is of such extraordinary importance, is subject to particular conditions and is liable to a whole number of disturbances. (“Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defense” 461-62)

As Freud points out, the experience of double vision is *disorienting*. Though the pervert’s disavowal of traumatic perception provides an “ingenious solution” to the problem of castration anxiety, “everything has to be paid for one way or another” (462). In trying to hold up both sides of a double bind, the pervert’s ego splits—a consequence dramatized in the film version of *Fight Club* by the casting of *two* Hollywood stars to play Tyler Durden.

There is, of course, a hitch in this scheme. The model for all forms of fetishistic disavowal is the disavowal of castration. And yet, in *Fight Club* the castrating agency—the father—is nowhere in evidence. So what exerts the torsion on Tyler’s psyche, what splits it apart? If not the father, then who? Though he is gone, the father is not forgotten. Indeed, his absence is keenly felt—Tyler’s father is referred to more than a dozen times throughout the novel (many of these passages are reproduced as dialogue in the film) while fathers in general receive another half a dozen mentions, particularly in the context of being emotionally remote, physically distant or just plain disappointing.

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.

What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women. (50)

The preoccupation with absent fathers is among the most remarked-upon features of *Fight Club*. Some critics see this as the linchpin of Palahniuk's dissection of contemporary masculinity and the author himself as the spokesman for a generation of men adrift, torn between conflicting demands and bereft of the guarantees of tradition (cf. Michael Clark, Tuss). Kevin Boon, for example, suggests that *Fight Club* is the product of a paradoxical culture environment, where "what is explicitly asked of these men contradicts what is implicitly expected" (269). Other critics are suspicious of the rhetoric of fatherlessness, seeing it as neoconservative nostalgia for patriarchal social relations and a coded form of misogyny. "The pathology at issue," suggests Henry Giroux, "is its intensely misogynistic representation of women, and its intimation that violence is the only means through which men can be cleansed of the disastrous effect that women have on shaping their identities" (18). Whatever one's political slant, all agree that *Fight Club* is in a very significant way *about* the decline of paternal symbolic authority. Even the author gets in on the act. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Palahniuk ponders one of the reasons for the runaway success of his first novel, "Every guy I know feels let down by his father. Even my father feels let down by *his* father" (*Stranger* 228).

Why are fathers in such disrepute? Paradoxically, it has something to do with the fact that fathers are no longer seen as castrating figures. Following Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek suggests that the Freudian father (the Oedipal patriarch) is the product of a

particular historical moment, one that had already begun to recede even at the moment of its enunciation.

In the modern bourgeois nuclear family, the two functions of the father which were previously separated, that is, embodied in different people (the pacifying Ego Ideal, the point of ideal identification, and the ferocious superego, the agent of cruel prohibition; the symbolic function of totem and the horror of taboo), are united in one and the same person.... The ambiguous rivalry with the father figure, which emerged with the unification of the two functions in the bourgeois nuclear family, created the psychic conditions for modern Western dynamic creative individualism; at the same time, however, it sowed the seeds of the subsequent ‘crisis of Oedipus’ (or, more generally, with regard to figures of authority as such, of the ‘crisis of investiture’ that erupted in the late nineteenth century): symbolic authority was more and more smeared by the mark of obscenity and thus, as it were, undermined from within. Lacan’s point, of course, is that this identity is the ‘truth’ of the Oedipus complex: it can ‘function normally’ and accomplish its job of the child’s integration into the socio-symbolic order only in so far as this identity remains concealed—the moment it is posited as such, the figure of paternal authority potentially turns into an obscene *jouisseur* (the German word is *Luder*) in whom impotence and excessive rage coincide, a ‘humiliated father’ caught in imaginary rivalry with his son. (Žižek, *Ticklish* 313)

The Freudian father, then, is a composite figure, consisting of both friendly ego ideal (the basis for identification) and forbidding ideal ego (stern superego). The forces that bound these two distinct functions together have weakened (indeed, the bond was disintegrating even as Freud was basing his theories on the assumption of its permanence and universality). The superego function has migrated from the father to other cultural figures (Žižek points to the tyranny of the expert knowledge in contemporary culture³⁰). This leaves the father strangely bereft, incapable of fulfilling his symbolic mandate. As the narrator of *Fight Club* relates: “My father never went to college so it was really important I go to college. After college, I called him long distance and said, now what? My dad didn’t know” (51).

³⁰ See *On Belief*, 93.

What the narrator poses to his father here (“now what?”) is not so much a question as it is *a demand*. What he is asking for is not guidance but initiation. What he wants is for the Oedipal father to usher him into the symbolic order through the ceremonial function of castration. What he gets, though, is disappointment.³¹ In this, the narrator is a representative figure, dizzied by seesawing cultural attitudes towards the father. Paul Verhaeghe suggests that the twentieth century is divided between a deepening disillusionment with the authoritarian father (held responsible for both the atom bomb and concentration camps) and, since the moment of his “defeat” in the countercultural revolts of the 1960s, a fervent desire for his return. It is as if, Colette Soler suggests, contemporary culture is eager to educate fathers into their role, somehow rehabilitating symbolic efficacy without reactivating authoritarian tendencies (op cit. Verhaeghe 132). Until such a re-education process is complete, however, we are left in the anxious position of having no symbolic guarantee for our actions. Without this assurance, we are confronted “with the need to invent the basic rules of proper ethical conduct, since we lack any form of big Other, any symbolic point of reference that would serve as a safe and unproblematic moral anchor” (Žižek *Ticklish Subject* 332). One response to this situation, suggests Žižek, can be found in the contemporary proliferation of committees. Denied the certainties of symbolic authority, complex ethical problems (in, say, genetic research) are “solved” through appeals to consensus and expert knowledge. It should be pointed out

³¹ “Nowadays, we are living in a period when the symbolic father as such is murdered, together with the belief in him. It is no coincidence that the prevailing attitude today is so-called postmodern cynicism, which epitomizes above all widespread distrust and lack of belief in any symbolic function whatever.” (Verhaeghe “The Collapse of the Father Function” 135)

here, of course, that *committees* figure prominently in the evolution of fight club into Tyler Durden's terrorist army, Project Mayhem.³²

Shorn of his forbidding aspect, the post-Oedipal father stands revealed as an obscene figure, one who swaps the prohibition of enjoyment for its incitation. The emperor not only has no clothes, one might go so far as to say that he appears to be playing with himself. Of the narrator's many reminiscences of his father in *Fight Club*, several recall precisely this conspiratorially louche tone in matters sexual. One episode in particular gets at the heart of the matter. Early in what the narrator fails to realize as their courtship, Marla has a cancer scare. Unable to afford a doctor's visit, she asks the narrator to confirm that she has a suspicious lump. The incident prompts the narrator to recall a trip to the hospital of his own.

Marla's cold and sweating while I tell her in college I had a wart once. On my penis, only I say, dick. I went to the medical school to have it removed. The wart. Afterwards, I told my father. This was years after, and my dad laughed and told me I was a fool because warts like that are nature's French tickler. Women love them and God was doing me a favor.

Kneeling next to Marla's bed with my hands still cold from outside, feeling Marla's cold skin a little at a time, rubbing a little of Marla between my fingers every inch, Marla says those warts that are God's French ticklers give women cervical cancer.

So I was sitting on the paper belt in an examination room at the medical school while a medical student sprays a canister of liquid nitrogen on my dick and eight medical students watched. This is where you end up if you don't have medical insurance. Only they don't call it a dick, they call it a penis, and whatever

³² The anonymity of the earlier fight club is transformed into an autonomous cell structure. Mirroring the narrator's earlier experience with support groups, each committee meets on a designated weeknight—"Arson meets on Monday. Assault on Tuesday. Mischief meets on Wednesday. And Misinformation meets on Thursday. Organized Chaos. The Bureaucracy of Anarchy" (119)—and each is responsible for secretly carrying out proposals solicited and chosen by Tyler. "Nobody knows who draws a proposal, and nobody except Tyler knows what all the proposals are and which are accepted and which proposals he throws into the trash" (120). Committee members must ensure that they are never arrested (i.e. legal deniability) and, interestingly, cannot *laugh* at a proposal. Things are getting more serious both for Tyler and his various committees.

you call it, spray it with liquid nitrogen and *you might as well burn it with lye*, it hurts so bad. (103-4, italics mine)

Here the narrator rejects the obscene enjoyment of his father's advice ("warts like that are nature's French ticklers") in favour of symbolic castration, a procedure which is administered by one of Žižek's "expert" figures: the medical student. Perhaps the most significant element in this scene, however, comes in the narrator's seeming throwaway observation comparing the pain from the treatment to that of a lye burn. For it is precisely this type of chemical burn that Tyler uses to initiate his followers, marking (all too literally) the transition from the anonymous pugilists of fight club to Project Mayhem's committed cadre of space monkeys.

In *Fight Club*, then, the narrator's frustration with his *uneducated* father ("My father never went to college...") is mollified by the creation of fight club where he can *teach the father a lesson*.³³ For it is in the wake of their very first fight, after some prompting from the narrator, that Tyler admits that he was really fighting *his father* (53). Since the narrator and Tyler are the same person, this offers what is in fact a fascinating triangulation. Through a double disavowal, the narrator not only "creates" his own antagonist (Tyler), but he also projects upon himself the role of the father so Tyler can beat him (the father) into submission. Why must the father be humiliated so? The extreme ambivalence toward the father figure, who is both mourned and scorned in *Fight Club*, is

³³ "Today, however, it is the very symbolic function of the father that is increasingly undermined—that is, which is losing its performative efficiency; for the reason, a father is no longer perceived as one's Ego Ideal, the (more or less failed, inadequate) bearer of symbolic authority, but as one's ideal ego, imaginary competitor—with the result that subjects never really 'grow up', that we are dealing today with individuals in their thirties and forties who remain, in terms of their psychic economy, 'immature' adolescents competing with their fathers" (Žižek *Ticklish* 334).

the affective corollary of fetishistic disavowal, the psychic process that led to the splitting of the narrator's ego in the first place.

More than that, however, this vexed attitude towards the father is also characteristic of masochism. Gilles Deleuze suggests that by beating himself, the masochist is really targeting an introjected image of the father. "What the subject atones for is his resemblance to the father and the father's likeness in him: the formula of masochism is the humiliated father" (61). By reducing the powerful Oedipal father into a ridiculous homunculus to be shamed and ridiculed, the masochist both invokes and defends against the castration threat embodied by this figure. He keeps the father close and punishes him for his proximity. The masochist cannot accept his father as castrating agency and yet is compelled to look elsewhere for substitutes. In the case of Sacher-Masoch, who wished to be tortured by a "Venus in furs," Deleuze argues that paternal functions are symbolically transferred to a maternal representative of coldness and cruelty. The father is expelled from the symbolic order and his role as its guarantor (through paternal Law, the "name-of-the-father") is turned over to a proxy figure: the mother. Crucially, though, her symbolic efficacy is not inbuilt. Rather, it is the product of tacit negotiation with her supposed victim. The masochistic contract, with its emphasis on rules, is not a matter of protecting the masochist by circumscribing the dominatrix's otherwise absolute power. Instead, it confers these powers on the torturer by carefully setting out the conditions for their exercise. "The masochist appears to be held by real chains, but in fact is bound by his word alone. The masochistic contract implies not only the necessity of the victim's consent, but his ability to persuade, and his pedagogical and

judicial efforts to train his torturer,” Deleuze explains (75). “The function of the masochistic contract is to invest the mother-image with the symbolic power of the law” (76).

The masochistic contract functions somewhat differently for *Fight Club*’s Tyler Durden than it does for Severin, the whipping-boy of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* (1870), largely because of their respective historical circumstances. Writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Sacher-Masoch lived under the reign of the Oedipal patriarch at its zenith. Palahniuk, in contrast, is the laureate of its disappearance.³⁴ Consequently, Tyler accepts as *fait accompli* the very outcome Severin hopes to provoke through his own suffering: the humiliation of the father. In this sense, Tyler’s masochism provides an alibi for the mortified father; rather than chastising the forbidding figure, the beatings are meant to retroactively conceal his absence. Frustrated with declining paternal symbolic authority, Tyler founds fight club in order to do what the absent father either cannot or will not: *castrate himself*.³⁵

There is a catch, however. Castration (in its symbolic dimension) cannot be self-administered. Voluntarism is not enough. If the narrator is to arrest or reverse the father’s symbolic slide, the solution remains structurally barred from his own awareness. Accordingly, the perverse logic of disavowing his own identity comes into focus. By creating two (Tyler and ‘Jack’) where there is only one, the narrator generates a triadic

³⁴ Recall here Chuck Palahniuk’s claim: “Every guy I know feels let down by his father. Even my father feels let down by *his* father” (*Stranger* 228)

³⁵ I mean this quite literally. Towards the end of *Fight Club*, once the narrator realizes that Tyler is “my hallucination,” he follows Tyler’s trail from one fight club to the next, hoping to “undo the damage” and discover the ultimate goal of Project Mayhem (168, 175). Tyler, though, anticipates this pursuit and sets a number of traps for the narrator. Intercepted by a space monkey, the narrator is told: “You know the drill, Mr. Durden. You said it yourself. You said, if anyone ever tries to shut down the club, even you, then we have to get him by the nuts” (187).

structure where there was previously only a dual relation (with the female other: Marla). The introduction of a third term (the father) transforms what is a static and timeless relation into a complex sexual dialectic, one that cannot be synchronized because all three terms cannot be fully present at the same time. The father's traumatic presence is wounding (the 'cut' of castration) but it provides the very basis for separation, the first stirrings of subjective autonomy. Oedipal rivalry hastens the clear demarcation of self from other (in contrast to the duality of mother and child, which precedes any such distinction) and, upon its resolution, enables identification—the taking up of a sexed subject position. *Fight Club* is about the search for this third term at a time when its representative figure is nowhere to be found. “*Maybe* we don't need a father to complete ourselves,” the narrator muses (54, italics mine). His uncertainty is telling. The men of *Fight Club* recognize the necessary function of castration—namely, that there is no social relation without separation—but are forced to take matters *into their own hands*.

What makes the consensual violence of the fight an exemplary masochistic strategy is that by enduring punishment, one retroactively calls the punishing figure—the paternal agency or *Law*—into being. “The masochist must undergo punishment before experiencing pleasure,” remarks Deleuze. “It would be a mistake to confuse this temporal succession with logical causality: suffering is not the cause of pleasure itself but the necessary precondition for achieving it” (89). Masochism, in other words, consists of a short circuit, a paradoxical loop where punishment precedes prohibition—a perversal—where the law appears only after it has been broken. As Bruce Fink explains, what distinguishes a pervert from a neurotic is precisely this relation to law. “The neurotic

desires in relation to the law: the father says the child cannot have its mother, and the child thus unconsciously desires her. The pervert, on the other hand, does not desire as a function of the law—that is, does not desire what is prohibited. Instead, *he has to make the law come into being*,” (“Perversion” 55, italics in original). The masochistic pervert does not desire pleasure-in-pain, or humiliation and debasement in and of themselves; he *suffers* them only insofar as they express his desire for the law. Simply put, the pervert’s desire is not for what is prohibited—the beyond of law—but *for law itself*.

From Law to Superego: The Politics of Enjoyment

The problem with fight club is apparent from the very beginning; the (first two) rules were made to be broken—they lack the symbolic weight of the father’s law. “After a night in fight club,” the narrator tells us, “Your word is law” (49). As he goes on to note, though, the law isn’t what it used to be: “if other people *break that law* or question you, even that doesn’t piss you off” (49, italics mine). The question, of course, is why not? What kind of law is this? The answer is simple: the masochistic contract is no law at all, precisely because it misrecognizes the symbolic dimension of law itself. While “there’s grunting and noise at fight club like at the gym” and “there’s hysterical shouting in tongues like at church,” fight club, the narrator emphasizes “*isn’t about words*” (51, italics mine). Instead, “You fight to fight” (54). Indeed, fight club itself would not exist if the first two rules had been rigorously upheld. “Most of you,” Tyler yells in the cone of light at the center of a basement full of men, “you’re here because someone broke the rules. Somebody told you about fight club” (54). These rules, as we shall see, are an exemplary

instance of a superego injunction in that they surreptitiously permit what they formally prohibit. Slavoj Žižek calls superego the “nightly” law: the obscene underside of public Law, the unwritten rules that one can parse only by reading between the lines. Superego, he suggests, “emerges where the Law—the public Law, the Law articulated in the public discourse—fails; at the point of this failure, the public Law is compelled to search for support in an illegal enjoyment” (*Metastases* 54). In contemporary society, superego imperatives abound.

Over the course of the last century we have moved from what Max Weber called the Protestant ethic of capitalism, where the guiding injunction was to work and save, to the perverse ethic of late capitalism, which commands us to enjoy and spend. Where the Law demands the renunciation of enjoyment—as in the case of Freud’s Oedipal drama, where the child must abandon his incestuous claim on the mother—the superego actively solicits it.³⁶ “Late capitalist subjects are encouraged to find, develop, and express themselves. They are enjoined to have fulfilling sex lives and rewarding careers, to look their very best—no matter what the cost—and to cultivate their spirituality,” explains Jodi Dean. “That these injunctions conflict, that one cannot do them all at once, and that they are accompanied by everpresent warnings against potential side effects, reminds us that we are dealing with the superego” (99). Perhaps the best example of this shift is provided by President George W. Bush who in the wake of the 9/11 attacks urged Americans to do

³⁶ To the point that “milf” has entered the vernacular as a term for a sexually desirable mature woman (i.e. Mother I’d Like to Fuck). When the maternal object—the very model of the Thing that cannot be possessed and the ultimate basis for the emergence of Law in the form of the incest taboo—circulates throughout our contemporary libidinal economy like any other object of desire, we can be sure that Prohibition (the father’s “No”) has effectively vanished. As Žižek points out, “the void of this *No* solicits perversions” (*For They Know Not Ixv*).

their part in the War on Terror: keep shopping.³⁷ This prompted a great deal of consternation among the chattering classes, who noted the disparity between patriotic duty circa 1941 and 2001. During the second world war, citizens were encouraged to do without: enduring shortages of items earmarked as war matériel and buying Liberty bonds (i.e. saving), which funded the war effort. This experience of shared sacrifice is at the centre of the “greatest generation” mythos and in sharp contrast to the homefront today.³⁸

Contemporary society is thus characterized by a transformation in our attitude toward enjoyment. “Whereas formerly society has required subjects to renounce their private enjoyment in the name of social duty, today the only duty seems to consist in enjoying oneself as much as possible,” offers Todd McGowan (2). This marks an epochal shift in the logic of social organization: “rather than being tied together through a shared sacrifice, subjects exist side by side by side in their isolated enclaves of enjoyment” (2). In *Fight Club*, these enclaves are represented by the narrator’s condo, “a sort of filing cabinet for widows and young professionals. The marketing brochure promised a foot of concrete floor, ceiling, and wall between me and any adjacent stereo or turned-up television” (41). The building’s architecture protects its occupants against the enjoyment of others—their loud noises and strange smells—while allowing one to enjoy in private. After all, as the narrator points out, “a foot of concrete is important when your next-door neighbour lets the battery on her hearing aid go and has to watch her game shows at full

³⁷ Jodi Dean performs an incisive critique of George W. Bush along the lines indicated here in *Žižek’s Politics*.

³⁸ Here is another example of the imperative to enjoy: in 2005, the personal savings rate in America dipped into negative territory for the first time since 1933, when the country was in the teeth of the Great Depression.

blast” (41).³⁹ The experience of such enclosure, however, is stifling. Not even the windows open, leaving “all seventeen hundred airtight feet [smelling] like the last meal you cooked or your last trip to the bathroom” (41). In escaping the threatening spectacle of the other’s enjoyment, the narrator cannot achieve any distance from his own.

The impasse at which the narrator finds himself is immediately recognizable. Our society is saturated in enjoyment. One need only think of the claims that advertising makes on our attention—injunctions that we enjoy ourselves using this product or that service—not to mention its steady encroachment on public space. The absurdity of contemporary experience, though, is that even amidst all of this apparent enjoyment, “there is less pleasure now than there ever was” (Verhaeghe *Love* 133). Because the dominant imperative today is prescriptive (“More!”) rather than proscriptive (“No!”), the negative space carved out by Prohibition—in the sense that, as Dennis Foster puts it, “the limit creates the beyond” (12)—is reintegrated back into everyday life. The lifting of repression, though, does not pave the way to liberation. In fact, it accomplishes the very opposite, unleashing overwhelming anxiety. The problem, McGowan points out, is that “the superegoic command “Enjoy!” merely produces a sense of obligation to enjoy oneself; *it does not produce enjoyment*” (37, italics in original). The more we try to comply with the imperative to enjoy the more we feel our failure to comply *fully* (38).

This is evident in the very structure of consumer capitalism, where commodity production is second to the production of *demands*. *More* is never *enough*. Superego imperatives can never be satisfied. “Our debt to the superego is unredeemable: the more

³⁹ Contrast this with Marla’s room in the dead-end Regent hotel, “up eight flights of stairs and down a noisy hallway with canned television laughter coming through the doors” (60).

we pay it off, the more we owe,” explains Žižek (*Metastases* 68). Capitalism is “structurally homologous” to the superego in that both create “a vicious cycle of desire, whose apparent satisfaction only widens the gap of its dissatisfaction” (Žižek *Tarrying* 209). This frustration is all too familiar to today’s consumer. “You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple of years you’re satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you’ve got your sofa issue handled. Then, the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed,” the narrator of *Fight Club* laments. “Then you’re trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you” (44).

In *Fight Club*, the narrator crumbles under the strain of living up to these superego imperatives and hallucinates an alter ego to help him break out of the vicious circle: “Deliver me, Tyler, from being perfect and complete” (46). Together—so to speak—they found fight club as a sanctuary from the compulsion to enjoy. In this sense, fight club emulates the support groups where the narrator first stumbled upon the virtues of “therapeutic physical contact” (20). By mingling with the terminally ill, the narrator discovers a space free from the exhausting superego imperatives that animate contemporary society. “We all work so hard all the time,” he complains. “This is the only place I ever really relax and give up. This is my vacation” (18). What keeps enjoyment at bay in these support groups is the looming prospect of death. In the absence of explicit symbolic prohibitions limiting enjoyment, death itself proves to be about the only universally recognized constraint that we can still imagine. The narrator gravitates to the suffering of others because through them he can experience what is otherwise absent from

a society where everything is permitted because nothing is forbidden: finitude, or the experience of the limit as such. “Every evening I died and every evening I was born. Resurrected” (22). The efficiency of this solution depends on dissimulation: the narrator is not really sick. “If I didn’t say anything, people in a group assumed the worst” (22). By faking it, the narrator is able to vicariously experience the limit (i.e. death) while simultaneously keeping his distance, an oscillation characteristic of fetishistic disavowal. Marla shares his morbid appreciation. Prior to attending the support groups, she worked in a funeral home “to feel good about myself, just the fact I was breathing” (38). Funerals, though, “are all abstract ceremony” compared to the groups, where “you have the real experience of death”—or rather, *dying*, confronting one’s end. “Now that she knows where we’re all going, Marla feels every moment of her life” (38).

Ironically, the narrator and Marla only begin to enjoy themselves in the face of privation and loss. Without it, Marla tells the narrator: “There was no real sense of life because she had nothing to contrast it with” (38). Here we come to the fundamental paradox of enjoyment: it can only be experienced as its own obstacle. “If he is to follow the path of his pleasure,” advises Lacan, “man must go around it” (*Ethics* 95). This barrier is essential to the experience of enjoyment because without it, one is less enjoying than *enjoyed*. Enjoyment is inherently excessive, a traumatic imposition that overwhelms and annihilates the subject—unless, of course, she can defend against it by establishing at least a minimal distance toward it (precisely, the detached perspective implied by Marla above; the position that one must occupy in order to see the “contrast”). In other words,

because enjoyment is impossible (since full enjoyment would paradoxically disintegrate the enjoying subject), we are only able to enjoy at a remove.

Far from frustrating us because it simply sets no limit, *the absence of explicit limitation confronts us with the Limit as such, the inherent obstacle to satisfaction*: the true function of explicit limitation is thus to sustain the illusion that, through transgressing it, we can attain the limitless. (Žižek *Parallax* 296)

The elusive nature of enjoyment is such that it can be enjoyed only to the extent that one grants never having had it in the first place. Lacan refers to a legal term—usufruct—to illustrate this sense of the term: usufruct refers to a situation where one profits from (i.e. *enjoys*) another’s property, something that wasn’t ours to begin with (*Encore* 3).

Traditionally, Prohibition established and maintained this distance by interdicting enjoyment. Through explicit symbolic restrictions (variations on “Thou shalt not”), the Law demands that we renounce our claim on enjoyment, but as McGowan notes, “this enjoyment is something that *does not exist prior to its renunciation*” (16, italics in original). In other words, the Law forbids what was impossible in the first place: “*external hindrances that thwart our access to the object are there precisely to create the illusion that without them, the object would be directly accessible*—what such hindrances thereby conceal is the inherent impossibility of obtaining the object” (Žižek *Metastases* 94, italics in original). Prohibition doesn’t so much deprive us of our enjoyment as it protects us from it by interposing an empty space that allows us to enjoy at a distance. Crucially, the medium for this renunciation is the symbolic order: the “incorporeal” realm of language, an abstract-impersonal structure where it is impossible to enjoy *directly* because of the inherent gap between reality and representation.⁴⁰ In this sense, it is not

⁴⁰ As Lacan notes in the Rome discourse, “the symbol first manifests itself in the killing of the thing” (*Écrits* 262).

simply *a* symbolic restriction (“No”), but the experience of the symbolic order itself *as restrictive*.⁴¹ “The symbolic order is, as Lacan puts it, the absence of things, and this absence is crucial for the possibility of mediation, because it serves to eliminate rivalry. If one subject doesn’t have a thing, at least another doesn’t have it either, which provides some degree of consolation for lost enjoyment,” explains McGowan. “This is why prohibition is so important for holding society together: if I see that no one else is able to enjoy, I feel as if we are partners in loss rather than rivals in enjoyment” (17)

Today, however, Prohibition is on the wane. The Law has been rendered inoperative by wide-ranging suspicions about symbolic authority in all its guises.⁴² One need only think of the common conviction that all politicians are corrupt; the corollary to the “virtual disappearance of a belief in ‘the’ system in our century” (Verhaeghe *Love* 125). Moreover, since we reflexively question the legitimacy of the framework in which political decisions are made, the decisions themselves are experienced as unconscionable intrusions on our right to enjoy. In the (seeming) absence of authority, any exercise of power appears obscenely stained by enjoyment. The more the social order is permeated with enjoyment, the less able is the public Law to compel us to renounce our own. But without this sacrifice, we cannot distance ourselves from our own enjoyment. This leaves us caught up in an autistic closed circuit, where, as Tyler tells the narrator, “everyone feels like the center of attention but completely cut off from participating with anyone else” (88).

⁴¹ “Man is the subject captured and tortured by language” (Lacan *The Psychoses* 243).

⁴² Jean-François Lyotard’s discussion of the decline of metanarratives and postmodernism’s legitimation crisis is among the most influential statements on this topic (*The Postmodern Condition*).

Why have we lost all faith in symbolic authority? Žižek describes this condition as our latter-day superego fundamentalism, which pertains not necessarily to one's religiosity, but to the way we relate to the "formal status of belief" (*Parallax* 350). In a strange way, he argues, what religious fundamentalists *and* liberal cynics both share is "the loss of the ability to believe in the proper sense of the term" (*Parallax* 348). Belief is a function of symbolic authority. Žižek is fond of citing as an example the case of a judge. Though he may be a miserable human being, as flawed and frail as the rest of us, the moment he puts on his robe we treat him *as if* he were the Law itself. This disavowal ("as if") is crucial because it maintains a gap between the individual and their symbolic mandate. Even though we know the judge is just another person, we respect the symbolic fiction—which, for this very reason, has real effects (evident in the day-to-day functioning of the legal system).⁴³ A fundamentalist, in contrast, believes that the real effects generated by our collective respect for this symbolic fiction *must come from somewhere*, that there must be some basis in the Real beyond the guarantee of symbolic fiction. He simply cannot abide this gap between the real person and their symbolic identity. The latter-day fundamentalist, Jodi Dean argues, "cannot accept the fact that law has no authority outside itself, [and has] to repress the fact that law is necessary without

⁴³ Renata Salecl discusses the curious potency of simple respect in her discussion of paternal symbolic authority:

Respect, therefore, has to do with the subject's relation to the lack in the other, which also means that respect is just another name for the anxiety that the subject feels in regard to this lack. The respect for the father, for example, needs to be understood as a way in which the subject tries to avoid the recognition that the father is actually impotent and powerless—that there is nothing behind his authority. Here, we come again to the problem of castration. Lacan understands castration as something that is linked to the radical emptiness of the subject. The subject is nothing by him or herself; he or she acquires all authority and power only from outside—from symbolic insignias. When we respect the father, we believe that insignias have real power and thus we cover up the fact that the father is castrated, which means that he is himself an empty and powerless subject. (148)

being true” (143). Ironically, in seeking to close the distance between the two, he reveals himself incapable of taking *a leap of faith*. Accordingly, Žižek offers the following as the “formula” of fundamentalism: “what is foreclosed from the symbolic (belief) returns in the Real (of a direct knowledge). A fundamentalist does not believe, he *knows* directly” (Žižek *Parallax* 348).

Our mounting inability to believe, it should be noted, does not mean that our beliefs, or even the symbolic function itself, no longer exist—in fact, it points to the opposite. The absolute expansion of the symbolic order, the pathologization of the public sphere that I addressed above, has the paradoxical effect of declining symbolic efficiency. In the ‘fullness’ of its presence—a self-evident quality Guy Debord noted in his formulation of the society of the spectacle—we can no longer perceive the gap between ‘reality’ and the symbolic fiction; the gap separating our knowledge from our beliefs. Quite simply, we have become *unconscious* of them. They are what Žižek, *pace* former U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, calls the “unknown knows”; *the things that we don’t know that we know*, “the disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not even aware of adhering to ourselves” (*Organs* 95). In the case of the fundamentalist above, we should modify Žižek’s formula: he does not believe that he believes, he *believes* that he *knows* directly. The unconscious belief, in other words, is that direct knowledge or, more to the point, *direct enjoyment*, or unmediated access to the Real is possible in the first place. To the degree that it urges us onward in hopes of experiencing either knowledge or enjoyment in all its immediacy—an impossible ideal, to be sure—the fundamentalist formula resembles nothing so much as the unbearable pressure of the superego. In the

past, the Law both allowed us to name this impossibility (“taboo”) while also enabling us to enjoy in the breach by providing us with a limit to be transgressed (a fleeting pleasure). In its wake, superego forecloses on both options: we are oblivious to the way our conscious activity is shaped and determined by the implicit fantasy of full enjoyment; and, without the explicit limit of symbolic prohibition, we find ourselves immured in enjoyment, unable to establish any distance from it.

Tyler Durden, to return to the matter at hand, identifies the crisis endemic to post-Oedipal subjectivity and through the carefully regulated violence of fight club, founds a utopian space free from the consumerist imperatives to enjoy. In this sense, fight club is intended to function in much the same way as a support group or even a (Lacanian) psychoanalytic session. “Enjoyment today effectively functions as a strange ethical duty: individuals feel guilty not for violating moral inhibitions by way of engaging in illicit pleasures, but for not being able to enjoy,” explains Žižek. “In this situation, psychoanalysis is the only discourse in which you are not allowed to enjoy—not forbidden to enjoy, just relieved of the pressure to do so” (*How to Read Lacan* 104). There is, however, a catch. Physical suffering, punishment, is not necessarily the same thing as the absence of enjoyment. Fight club is caught up in a contradiction whereby the sacrifice of enjoyment—the pure loss of castration, the very gesture supposed to establish an empty place—is itself a source of covert enjoyment.⁴⁴ The difference between fight club and the psychoanalytic clinic is the all-too-evident masochistic pleasure these men take in their own pain. Even as they try to beat enjoyment out of one another, the pugilists

⁴⁴ Or we could put it like this: Tyler’s mode of fetishistic disavowal—which is, of course, the disavowal of *castration*—makes a fetish of castration itself.

pound it home. “The paradox of *Fight Club* is that it makes an excess of sacrifice. It invests sacrifice itself with desire” (Bulent and Laustsen). In order to rid themselves of this excess, the men of fight club must make more and outsized gestures of renunciation that succeed only in generating a further excess. Far from demarcating a space free from enjoyment, then, fight club is suffused with it.

When we are caught in the vicious cycle of the imperative of *jouissance*, the temptation is great to opt for what appears to be its ‘natural’ opposite, the violent renunciation of *jouissance*. Is this not the fundamental underlying theme of all fundamentalisms? Do they not all endeavor to contain (what they perceive as) the excessive ‘narcissistic hedonism’ of contemporary secular culture with the call to reintroduce the spirit of sacrifice? However, a psychoanalytic perspective immediately enables us to see why such an endeavour goes wrong: the very gesture of renouncing enjoyment... generates a surplus-enjoyment of its own. (*Parallax* 381)

As Žižek points out above, the masochistic strategy of consensual violence in *Fight Club* is doomed to failure. Tyler’s fundamentalist solution to the problem of excessive enjoyment only exacerbates it, requiring in turn more and greater sacrifices. “The superego injunction to enjoy is immanently intertwined with the logic of sacrifice: the two form a vicious cycle, each extreme supporting the other” (Žižek *Parallax* 381). As the narrator discovers after losing control of himself and beating a sparring partner to a pulp, “You can build up a tolerance to fighting, and maybe I needed to move onto something bigger. It was that morning Tyler invented Project Mayhem” (123).⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Fight club’s declining efficiency is underlined by the fact that, as the narrator reports, “the insomnia was on again” (122).

“I wanted the whole world to hit bottom”

When fight club can no longer contain the surplus enjoyment generated by Tyler’s masochistic strategy of consensual violence, it erupts in the form of Project Mayhem. The aggression that was initially directed within—beating oneself through the in(ter)vention of another—inevitably explodes without, as exemplified by the narrator’s brutal assault on a first-timer, a young guy with an angel’s face. Describing himself as “in a mood to destroy something beautiful,” the narrator flouts the rules of fight club. Too enraged to know if Angel Face has tapped out and past caring, he viciously beats him into a stupor and then into the pavement (123). This is not an entirely random outburst. Angel Face is described as particularly attractive—and feminine: “Put him in a dress and make him smile, and he’d be a woman” (128). This detail is troubling; it certainly lends credence to those like Giroux who dismiss *Fight Club* as misogynistic. It also plays as jealous rivalry tinged with homoeroticism; the narrator fears that Angel Face will find favour with Tyler, supplanting him as Tyler’s partner (this tension is more evident in the film than the novel, largely due to the interplay of suggestive looks and impassive countenances provided by Norton, Pitt and Jared Leto as Angel Face). Whatever the case, what is at issue here is the way fight club itself has begun to teem with surplus enjoyment, of which the narrator’s rising passion is but a symptom. Fight club’s carefully calibrated homosocial bond—an idealized fellowship composed of equal parts intimacy and impersonality—is beginning to fray. Tyler, then, founds Project Mayhem as a new solution to the problem of enjoyment.

Where fight club is presented as the inherent transgression of the social order (“You don’t talk about fight club”), Project Mayhem represents the foundation of a new one. This community, however, elevates transgression to a first principle by reversing the relationship between the formal order and its obscene supplement, or Law and Superego. “The illegitimate violence by which law sustains itself must be concealed at any price, because this concealment is the positive condition of the functioning of law,” explains Žižek. “It functions in so far as its subjects are deceived, in so far as they experience the authority of law as ‘authentic and eternal’ and overlook ‘the truth about usurpation’” (*For They Know Not* 204). The point here is that the self-grounding of Law is not simply a transgressive act; the Law is transgression itself—its authority depends on the “primordial repression” of this fact, which nonetheless persists in the form of subterranean flows of violent enjoyment.⁴⁶ This supplement can never be obliterated; it is this obdurate and indestructible quality that Lacan evokes as that which sticks to the sole of your shoe.⁴⁷ The empty formalism of the Law, in other words, is bound to some repressed pathological content in a relationship of dialectical tension, what I’ve described elsewhere in the dissertation as a disjunctive synthesis.

The problem today is that this tension has slackened with the widespread collapse of symbolic authority. The prevailing attitude of cynical distance and thoroughgoing skepticism suggests that we consider ourselves ‘undeceived’ about the Law; its obscene

⁴⁶ “Žižek argues that what really binds a community together, what really tells people they are members of the same group, is not their knowing what laws to follow but their knowing what laws to break” (Dean 151)

⁴⁷ “For the real, whatever upheaval we subject it to, is always and in every case in its place; it carries its place stuck to the sole of its shoe, there being nothing that can exile it from it” (“Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” 17). I should point out that I am using the Real and enjoyment as synonyms for one another here, which is not entirely accurate. Perhaps a more concise formulation is that enjoyment is how we experience the Real.

excess is in full view and unavoidable. Enjoyment seeps to the surface, flooding the social order as Superego moves to the fore. No longer able to compel public duty (i.e. renunciation of enjoyment), the Law is overrun by the clamor of private satisfactions; Žižek calls this the politics of enjoyment, where positive rights trump negative liberties. Since enjoyment permeates the pathological public sphere (recalling Seltzer), politics consists of portioning it out: hence the insistent rhetoric of recognition and redress. Competition for compensation, though, turns the desublimated public sphere into a realm of dissatisfaction, because having one's claim on enjoyment recognized is valuable only to the extent that no one else has it. Frustrated with the failure of authority figures to assume their mandate and wary of them as potential rivals in enjoyment—in short, finding them *wanting*—Tyler institutes himself as the new boss, constitutes a new polity (the space monkeys) and seeks to impose his will upon the world. The question, of course, is whether the rules of this fraternal order (or, as Freud might put it, *horde-r*) are a satisfying substitute for paternal law.⁴⁸ The answer is troubling. In compensating for declining symbolic authority, Tyler becomes increasingly *authoritarian*. Ultimately Tyler cannot imagine an alternative to the father other than becoming him. By the time the fight clubs have shifted into the terrorist plot Project Mayhem, the first, second and *last* rule is now “You don't ask questions” (122, 140). And when Tyler seeks to remake the world in the image of his fraternal order (“In Tyler we trusted”), events quickly spiral out of

⁴⁸ On the primal horde, see Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. Juliet Flower McCannell offers a fascinating analysis of 'fraternity' as the supplement to democracy in the rise of modern republics (*The Regime of the Brother*). Juliet Mitchell offers great insight into the way lateral relationships have replaced vertical ones in contemporary society (*Siblings*).

control as he seeks to impose his particular mode of conviviality—which is to say, his masochistic *enjoyment*—upon everyone else.

In Project Mayhem, then, the masochistic fantasy is turned inside out. Tyler sets out to privatize the public sphere, remaking the world in his own image. “Everybody in Project Mayhem is part of Tyler Durden and vice versa” (155). This reorientation is evident in a new set of rules: “No questions. No questions. No excuses and no lies. The fifth rule about Project Mayhem is you have to trust Tyler” (125). Aside from the repetition of the first two rules—reminding us of the excessive nature of superego injunctions—Project Mayhem’s stripped-down guidelines share little in common with those of fight club. In the case of the former, the rules serve two basic functions: defending the narrator’s fantasy from exposure (“You don’t talk about fight club”) and regulating the safe conduct of the fight. In the case of the latter, the rules are geared solely towards producing blind obedience in the pursuit of an imperialist and expansionary agenda, regardless of consequences: “Project Mayhem had nothing to do with other people. Tyler didn’t care if other people got hurt or not” (122).

Accordingly, the purpose of Project Mayhem is “the complete and right-away destruction of civilization” (125). By invoking an apocalypse, Tyler sets out to castrate the world. The hallmark of a masochistic pervert, Žižek reminds us, is that he “gains satisfaction from the very obscenity of the gesture of installing the rule of Law—that is, of ‘castration’” (*Plague* 35). “For psychoanalysis, the pervert is the subject for whom castration has not been fully operative, which is why the subject endlessly searches for the law that might complete castration,” explains Renata Salecl (155). In Project

Mayhem, castration is elevated into an eschatology, a cockeyed cargo cult of Tyler: “Believe in me and you shall die, forever” (145). The problem in *Fight Club* is that ‘castration’ is no longer seen as the means to invoke the social relation, but as an end in itself. This short circuit is condensed in the figure of Tyler’s kiss, the mark that he uses to ‘castrate’ his followers, initiating the men of fight club into Project Mayhem and granting them a new identity in the process: space monkey.

“With enough soap...”

The pivotal moment in the transition from fight club to Project Mayhem comes when Tyler initiates his first disciple: the narrator. At this point in the story, the narrator has been living—and fighting—with Tyler for about a month (57). In one of the oneiric coincidences that drive the novel’s plot, the narrator is sent home by his boss for showing up for work in clothes more battered than his face.⁴⁹ “So I can wash the pants, Tyler has to show me how to make soap,” he states matter-of-factly (65). What at first appears to be one of Tyler’s charming idiosyncrasies, his penchant for self-reliance, practical know-how, and living off the grid, turns into something else entirely.⁵⁰ One of the byproducts of

⁴⁹ The narrator’s laconic rendition of this encounter is a fine example of Palahniuk’s compressed prose:

The blood, is it mine?
Yeah, I say. Some of it.
This is the wrong answer. (64)

⁵⁰ I’m leaving out a major part of this episode which concerns Marla’s reappearance in the narrator’s life as *Tyler’s lover*; a fact that fills the narrator with rage. “How could I compete for Tyler’s attention,” he seethes. “Long story short, now Marla’s out to ruin another part of my life. Ever since college, I make friends. They get married. I lose friends” (60, 62). Significantly, Marla uses Tyler’s freezer to store little sandwich bags of fat gleaned from her mother. She is saving up for a collagen lip injection and “her mom figures that familial collagen would be better than Marla ever having to use the cheap cow kind” (91). This fat, of course, is what Tyler uses to make his initial batch of soap. He embezzles “Marla’s collagen trust fund,” which forms the basis for his soon-to-be burgeoning capitalist enterprise, The Paper Street Soap Company (91). “Marla’s probably still in the house, throwing magazines against the walls and screaming how I’m a prick and a monster two-faced capitalist suck-ass bastard” (94). Soap is an embodied philosophy in *Fight Club*, and the denial of the mother at the heart of this text is an extremely problematic issue.

soap-making, he tells the narrator, is glycerin—which combined with nitric acid makes nitroglycerin. Soap is not only the yardstick of civilization, as Freud would have it (*Civilization* 739); the truth is closer to Walter Benjamin: “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (“Theses” 256). In *Fight Club*, soap signifies the perfect coincidence of ideality and materiality: the fastidious hygiene of asceticism and the polluted sense of abjection. It not only symbolizes antagonism; it renders it palpable. Tyler’s materialist philosophy attests to “the fact that what we call ‘society’ is the congelation of an original violence which can at any moment erupt again and pulverize the established order” (Žižek *For They Know Not* 86). ““With enough soap,” Tyler says, “you could blow up the whole world”” (73).

Tyler not only shares this dreadful knowledge about the underworld of production and the obscene supplement to the social order with the narrator, he directly exposes him to it. Kissing the back of the narrator’s hand, he sprinkles lye flakes on top. “This is a chemical burn,” Tyler said, “and it will hurt more than you’ve ever been burned” (74). Caught up in the mania of fundamentalism, Tyler’s kiss collapses the distinction between symbolic ‘cut’ of castration and a physical wound, literalizing it as Truth and thus missing out on the symbolic efficiency of castration: the establishment of an empty place free of enjoyment. As a result, since nothing is absent in the Real, enjoyment is never really ‘lost’ and thus cannot be found again, stifling desire, inducing anxiety and spawning frustration which, in turn, unleashes castration in perpetuity. This proves to be the text’s model “perfect moment,” a frozen scene that Deleuze argues is typical of masochist

fantasy and one that Tyler wants to reproduce on an ever-expanding scale and heightened intensity.

“Everything up to now is a story,” Tyler says, “and everything after now is a story” (75). The chemical burn episode constitutes the navel of the novel, the suspended point where it directly touches the pure antagonism of the Real and passes over into traumatic senselessness; “one of the definitions of the Lacanian Real is that it is the flayed body, the palpitation of the raw, skinless, red flesh” (Žižek *Metastases* 116). It is excluded from the narrative proper precisely because in it Tyler stages what Žižek calls the ‘impossible’ scene of castration, the Fall into the realm of mortality and loss. “Someday,” Tyler says, “you will die, and until you know that, you’re useless to me” (76). What makes it impossible is that castration symbolizes a logical contradiction: “the loss of something which the subject never had in the first place” (Žižek *Plague* 15).⁵¹ It is this primordial loss that makes gain possible. However, because this trauma is structural rather than historical—since it never happened—it must be retroactively inferred. Tyler, though, stages it as an actual event. “Tyler says to pay attention because this is greatest moment of my life” (74).⁵² Curiously, even as Tyler exhorts the narrator to enjoy the shock of “hitting bottom,” he provides a measure of distance from the immediacy of searing flesh. As the narrator is writhing in pain, Tyler tells him what amounts to the origin story of Project Mayhem; a tale that both doubles and distracts from the trauma of the narrator’s

⁵¹ “Let us imagine a situation in which the subject aims at X (say, a series pleasurable experiences); the operation of castration does not consist in depriving him of any of these experiences, but adds to the series a purely potential, nonexistent X, with respect to which the actually accessible experiences appear all of a sudden as lacking, not wholly satisfying” (Žižek *Plague* 15).

⁵² A sentiment the narrator later repeats, “This is the greatest moment of *our* life” (75, italics mine). The plural is interesting; for a moment, the narrator’s careful disavowal of the fact that he is Tyler slips, jarred loose by the shock of the burn.

castration. Tyler's invented tradition, his fantasy, is illuminating on a number of levels; foremost among them is his revelation that: "soap and human sacrifice go hand in hand" (75)

"In ancient history," he begins, "human sacrifices were made on a hill above a river" (76). After generations of burnt offerings, the hill itself took on a striking feature. Due to the presence of melted fat and a lye solution created by the combination of ash and rainwater, "a thick white discharge of soap crept out from the base of the altar and crept downhill toward the river" (76). Ancient people would come to this spot to wash their clothes, a marked advance over the previous method, which consisted of using their own urine (for ammonia). Not insignificantly, Tyler lets this detail slip just as the narrator, delirious with pain, loses control of his own bladder. To Tyler, this epitomizes the narrator's essentially benighted condition and highlights what is at stake in this castration ritual: uplift. The discovery of soap is an epic narrative of separation explaining how culture emerged from nature.⁵³ By teaching the narrator how to make soap and then forcing him to suffer for it, Tyler exhorts him to fully assume the sacrifice, which is nothing less than the violent installation of Law, the founding act of civilization itself.

"Congratulations," Tyler says. "You're a step closer to hitting bottom. You have to see," Tyler says, "how the first soap was made of heroes." Think about animals used in product testing. Think about monkeys shot into space.

⁵³ Paul Verhaeghe notes that in contrast to hygiene, taboos were first organized around food and sex—i.e. dietary rules and the incest prohibition (*Love* 112).

“Without their death, their pain, without their sacrifice,” Tyler says, “we would have nothing.” (78)⁵⁴

Todd McGowan argues that the “onset of the social order constitutes an absolute barrier and beyond it we see only our own reflection. That is to say, any conception of *the* state of nature is a conception of *our* state of nature, the state of nature belonging to our specific social order” (15, italics mine). Tyler’s state of nature, as demonstrated in this curious tale about the origins of soap, tells us a great deal about the social order presumed by Project Mayhem.⁵⁵ What is most striking is the perfect coincidence of nostalgic past and post-apocalyptic future: both share a pastoral vision of the world almost entirely evacuated of people—save for his band of followers, nomads in a new world. “You’ll hunt elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center, and dig clams next to the skeleton of the Space Needle leaning at a forty-five degree angle,” Tyler says. “We’ll paint the skyscrapers with huge totem faces and goblin tikis, and every evening what’s left of mankind will retreat to empty zoos and lock itself in cages as protection against bears and big cats and wolves that pace and watch us from outside the

⁵⁴ Tyler is no Rousseau. There are no noble savages in his state of nature; in fact there is nobody at all, only bodies—noble sacrifices. “It was right to kill all those people,” Tyler says (77). Like any founding myth, Tyler’s soap opera is circular in that it presupposes what it purports to explain: the space monkey (Žižek *For They* 211).⁵⁴ *Fight Club*, argues Philip Wegner, “offers us a new kind of populist mass, one produced by the particular conditions of the service economy” (176). The space monkeys consist of a faceless mass of the un(der)employed among the grey and no-collar class; the neoliberal lumpen of copy boys, food court managers, mechanics, bartenders, and office ‘drones’. Simultaneously nostalgic and abject, “service” invokes the lost values of a productive America—duty, loyalty and self-sacrifice—while grimly celebrating their transvaluation into insecurity, obsolescence and disposability in the neoliberal era. The space monkeys are the revolting service class, both in the sense of their violent insurrection and abject, even excremental, identifications. Rather than resist their exploitation, the space monkeys actively embrace it and seek to accelerate and intensify the process; to “hit bottom” (70). Like the heroes of Tyler’s story, they aspire to the condition of a self directly produced as waste. “You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everyone else, and we are all part of the same compost pile,” says a space monkey, reading out Tyler’s mantra to an assembly of his fellows. “Our culture has made us all the same. No one is truly white or black or rich, anymore. We all want the same. Individually, we are nothing” (134). Another space monkey boils it down: “I am the shit and infectious human waste of creation” (170).

⁵⁵ For a classic study of the pastoral ideal in American literature, see Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden*.

cage bars at night” (124). The purpose of Project Mayhem, then, is to bring the two together into a timeless present through the abolition of History itself: symbolized by “the national museum which is Tyler’s real target” (11). The ‘return’ to nature is motivated by typically perverse considerations. Tyler is less interested in the possibilities of new civilization than he is mesmerized by the perpetual violence of its founding act, what Lacan called the “the fascination of the sacrifice itself” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 275).

*

Fight Club concludes on an ambiguous and unsettling note. Project Mayhem—at least the plot to destroy the museum—has been thwarted and Tyler symbolically ‘killed’, dispelled by the narrator’s radical gesture of shooting himself and suffering a disfiguring though not fatal blow. In effect, the narrator has sacrificed himself, which is to say, he has finally sacrificed the enjoyment that he derives from sacrifice.

One should always bear in mind that, for Lacan, the ultimate aim of psychoanalysis is not to enable the subject to assume the necessary sacrifice (to ‘accept symbolic castration’, to renounce immature narcissistic attachments, etc.), but to resist the terrible attraction of sacrifice—attraction, which, of course, is none other than that of the superego. Sacrifice is ultimately the gesture by means of which we aim at compensating the guilt imposed by the impossible superego injunction (the ‘obscure gods’ evokes by Lacan are another name for the superego). (*Žižek On Belief* 74)

After a series of false starts—from the support groups to fight club up to Project Mayhem itself—how does the narrator manage to extricate himself from the tangled web of unbearable superego demands? Recognizing his implication in the scene he has so painstakingly assembled and acknowledging his culpability for it, the narrator finally abandons (‘sacrifices’) his voyeuristic fantasy of distance. As he tells Tyler in their final

confrontation, “I remember everything” (205). By all rights, this should signal a pleasing outcome. The narrator has finally broken free from the superego fundamentalism that propels this text by trading in his semblance (i.e. Tyler) for a semblance of sanity—but only a semblance. Ominously, the end of Tyler is only the beginning.

“In my father’s house are many mansions” is the first line from the final chapter, borrowing from the Gospel of John (206). Here the narrator finds himself convalescing from his wounds in ‘Heaven’, where ‘angels’ hand him paper cups of medication and he gets letters from Marla, stuck on back ‘Earth’. He enjoys his confinement: “This was better than real life” (206). Institutionalization reimposes the traditional solution to the problem of enjoyment in the form of the holy trinity of doctor-daddy-deity: “I’ve met God across his long walnut desk with his diplomas hanging on the wall behind him” (207). The conjunction of medical, paternal and religious authority offers the narrator respite from the pathological smear of enjoyment and provides *Fight Club* with some degree of narrative closure. But, as Paul Verhaeghe observes, “the traditional solution has become impossible because the basis for it has disappeared—the patriarchal-monotheistic complex” (*Love* 116). It functions only due to the narrator’s continuing seclusion, his monastic retreat from society. He has been committed rather than ‘cured’. Though temporarily allayed, the old tensions are evident in the narrator’s hysterical attitude towards symbolic authority: “I look at God behind his desk, taking notes on a pad, but God’s got all this wrong. [...] You can’t teach God anything” (207). The narrator’s desire to ‘educate’ God attests to the persistence of a masochist mindset—he remains in thrall if not to Tyler than to some other obscure superego god and susceptible to the lure of sacrifice. Ultimately, the problem of enjoyment persists because the narrator

still clings to his fantasy of distance. Though he was finally able to take responsibility for his actions *as Tyler* he never does disclose his real name. “Nobody at work calls me Tyler Durden. My boss calls me by my real name. My parents know who I really am” (172). He remains a faceless, anonymous space monkey. And he is not alone. “Every once in a while, somebody brings me my lunch tray and my meds and he has a black eye or his forehead is swollen with stitches and he says: ‘We miss you Mr. Durden. [...] We look forward to getting you back’ ” (208).

CHAPTER THREE

In the ruins of the futures: Don DeLillo and the critique of cyber-capital

“The market is a kind of crass metaphysical whip that hastens the annihilation of the passing moment: there is only the next instant, and the next, rushing towards you, and in the Internet age an ideally informed person would never sleep at all but would trade the markets and chase news and rumours through the links twenty-four hours a day.”

— David Denby

“If reality cannot be understood (or no effort is made to understand it), then the individual’s subjectivity—alone in the universe, reflecting only itself—takes on an equally incomprehensible and horrific character. [...] By separating time from the outer world of objective reality, the inner world of the subject is transformed into a sinister, inexplicable flux and acquires—paradoxically, as it may seem—a static character.”

— Georg Lukács

“What appears in a minority of human individuals as an untiring impulsion towards further perfection can easily be understood as a result of the instinctual repression upon which is based all that is most precious in human civilization. [...] The dynamic conditions for its development are, indeed, universally present, but it is only in rare cases that the economic situation appears to favour [its] production.”

— Sigmund Freud

“Finance, the management of money’s ebbs and flows is not simply in the service of accessible wealth, but presents itself as a merger of business and life cycles, as a means for the acquisition of self. The financialization of daily life is a proposal for how to get ahead, but also a medium for the expansive movements of body and soul.”

— Randy Martin

Cosmopolis (2003) completes a process of triangulation begun in the epilogue to Don DeLillo’s masterpiece *Underworld* (1997) and continued in his meditation on the 9/11 attacks, published in *Harper’s* as “In the Ruins of the Future” (2001).¹ In all three pieces, DeLillo sets himself to the task of anatomizing cyber-capital, the potent

¹ The *Harper’s* essay will not be the object of significant comment here. For one thing, it is the product of the same historical moment as *Cosmopolis* and as such, evinces a markedly similar attitude towards cyber-capital as that novel. As DeLillo tells John Barron, *Cosmopolis* was nearly finished at the time of 9/11, even though it wasn’t published until a year-and-a-half later. DeLillo penned “In the ruins of the future” while taking a break from the novel to absorb what had happened: “The attacks didn’t affect the novel directly, but they certainly affected me.” For a thoughtful discussion of DeLillo’s essayistic style as an ethical response to 9/11, see Abel (“Don DeLillo’s ‘In the Ruins of the Future’: Literature, Images, and the Rhetoric of Seeing 9/11”).

convergence of information technology and financial speculation that defined the so-called ‘New Economy’ of the 1990s. In the passage from *Underworld* to *Cosmopolis* a distinct trajectory emerges. *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo tells John Barron, is set on “the last day of an era. It’s that interval between the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the current [period] of terror. It’s essentially the 1990s.” In it, DeLillo uses the metaphor of financial collapse to trace the breakdown of cyber-capital as a cosmopolitical justification, which is to say, as a comprehensive theory of existence that reconciles the order of nature (*cosmos*) with the order of society (*polis*). What I would like to do by way of an introduction is to examine the process whereby DeLillo’s initial euphoria about cyber-capital in *Underworld* dissipates and turns into dread in *Cosmopolis*. First, however, I will discuss how cyber-capital came to function as a cosmopolitical ideal in the first place.

During the 1990s, the market reigned supreme. Its extension to both the far corners of the world and the intimate spaces of everyday life seemed to unfold according to a logic all its own. In englobing the world, it appeared less as a human institution than a natural process. At the same time, however, the doctrine of neo-liberalism held that it was the highest expression of human freedom (‘choice’). The market, then, offered a unified solution to the distinction between the ‘mechanical causality’ of natural phenomena and the ‘logical rationality’ of human action (Toulmin 163). Adam Smith’s invisible hand smoothed over the gap between nature and society, holding both *cosmos* and *polis* within its grasp. One of the clearest expositions of the market as a cosmopolitical justification appears in Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the*

Last Man. He argues that the defeat of state communism and implosion of the Soviet system led to the unquestioned hegemony of global capitalism and liberal democracy. This was not simply a political victory. The triumph of liberal democratic capitalism effectively transcends politics since: “all of the really big questions had been settled” (xii). The future that he envisions is one absent of ideological conflict, of competing historical narratives, and of human intentionality. Politicians give way to experts as ideology is superseded by technology. Development will henceforth unfold according to the instrumental logic of modern natural science (‘rationalization’), which itself is cumulative and directional. The combination of free market economics and liberal democracy is quite literally a force of nature, albeit one that “makes possible the limitless accumulation of wealth, and thus the satisfaction of an ever-expanding set of human desires” (xiv).

Fukuyama’s description of “a universal evolution in the direction of capitalism” was first published in 1989 and it set the stage for the decade to follow (xv). By the mid-Nineties, the explosive appearance of the ‘New Economy’ seemed to emphatically confirm his claims. Emerging from the technology sector, the ‘New Economy’ was a gold rush of sorts, a virtual land grab, as investors attempted to stake a claim in cyberspace. The advent of the Internet, though, was only the most visible in a series of transformations. Perhaps the most far-reaching of these was psychological. Because economic expansion and technological innovation were so entwined as to be indistinguishable from one another, people were rather quickly seduced to the notion that since technology is unidirectional (i.e. it doesn’t move backwards) the economy must be,

too. If so, the business cycle of boom and bust no longer applies. What was “new” about the New Economy, then, was this sense that it was unprecedented, that the boom would go on and on. Optimism begat irrational exuberance and the boom blew into a bubble.

Don DeLillo’s 1997 novel *Underworld* appeared at the height of this frenzy and in its epilogue (“Das Kapital”) offers an electric account of what it meant to live in the New Economy. A compendium of official and secret histories stretching from the 1950s to the 1990s, *Underworld* strikes a tone that is both elegiac and cautiously optimistic by suggesting how long-standing Cold War antagonisms could be suspended or even dissolved in the new world order of the 1990s. DeLillo’s solution in the novel—in the sense of both an answer *and* a medium to contain these tensions—is cyberspace. “There is no space or time out here, or in here... There are only connections. Everything is connected,” he writes (825). *Underworld* is clearly taken with the redemptive possibilities of a networked world (a situation summed up in its final word: peace). Its narrative qualities—saturation and immersion—are those of a cosmopolis made flesh, an ideal materialized. “Is cyberspace a thing within the world or is it the other way around? Which contains the other and how can you tell for sure?” DeLillo asks (827). Uncertainty is a prelude to ecstatic abandonment as the author, caught up in the euphoria of the times, celebrates *not* knowing, not being able to draw the line between contemplation and action, between virtuality and physicality. At a moment when you can “imagine the word on the screen becoming a thing in the world” all states are possible and no boundaries are left to cross (827).

Cyber-capital, “untouched money” as DeLillo calls it, is the engine that brings this realm of pure immediacy into being. “[The] force of converging markets produces an instantaneous capital that shoots across horizons at the speed of light, making for a certain furtive sameness, a planing away of particulars,” he writes in *Underworld*. This “affects everything from architecture to leisure time to the way people eat and sleep and dream” (786). In *Underworld* DeLillo is interested in how a networked society is subjectively experienced, how this process of convergence *feels*. By the time he writes *Cosmopolis* he is more interested in how it doesn’t. *Cosmopolis* examines cyber-capital in its own abstract and inhuman context: virtual money circulating untouched beyond individual desires, beyond the “real” economy. Though only a few years separate the events portrayed in *Cosmopolis* (set in April 2000) and its precursor, they are worlds apart. The conjunction of technological advancement and human desire celebrated in *Underworld* proves to be a singular moment and a fleeting one at that. *Cosmopolis*, quite simply, depicts what comes *after*, what happens when progress inevitably leaves people behind. It does so in the character of Eric Packer, the epic personification—“such science and ego combined” (70)—of the ideology of cyber-capital.

Eric is a Wall Street financier and thinking machine who masters “the steepest matters in half an afternoon” and absorbs “medleys of data... in a couple of long still seconds” (7, 13). He is, as wife of twenty-two days suggests, “dedicated to knowing. I think you acquire information and turn it into something stupendous and awful. You’re a dangerous person. Do you agree? A visionary” (19). *Cosmopolis* finds Eric at the very height of his powers. As the formidably intelligent, ruthlessly competitive, and fabulously

wealthy head of Packer Capital, Eric is precisely the sort of “ideally informed person” David Denby refers to in the epigraph above, not the least because he is an insomniac: “Sleep failed him more often now, not once or twice a week, but four times, five” (5). Sleeplessness, though, is less a matter of hyper-vigilance than a worrying sign. What is keeping him up at night? Having conquered everything from currency speculation to philosophical speculation—“Freud is finished, Einstein’s next” (6)—there are no frontiers left for him to surmount. Finance can no longer contain his outsized ambition. His drive, however, remains. Spurred ever onwards, the aggressive logic of self-overcoming that is the secret of his success shades imperceptibly into hubristic over-reaching. Eric’s problem is that having achieved every measure of worldly success he doesn’t know what he wants. The novel opens in the grey dawn of indecision and turns on a moment of clarity: “Then he knew. He wanted to get a haircut” (7).

Reviewers largely ridiculed what was to follow. Insistent on getting his hair cut by his childhood barber, Eric settles into his customized stretch limousine for an eleven-block journey fated to take all day.² Facing the infamous snarl of midtown Manhattan gridlock, Eric’s progress is slowed even further by the lockdown attendant upon a presidential visit to the city, an anti-globalization protest, and the massive funeral cortège of Brutha Fez, his favourite Sufi rapper. There are also security concerns—his “complex” has received a threat on his life on a day when two other titans of finance will be

² A number of critics have emphasized the novel’s mythic resonances, ranging from its invocation of Homer’s *Odyssey* to the mortal consequences of traveling westward, i.e. towards death (Eric’s journey—and life—ends in the Upper West Side). John Updike, for example, refers to Eric’s “pharonic limo ride” while Brian Cook describes said limo as “a present-day skiff of Charon.” Meanwhile, Robert Weibezahl and Ron Franschell point to the parallels between DeLillo’s Packer and Joyce’s Leopold Bloom. See also Cowart, Freeman, Greif, and Powers.

assassinated.³ Eager to avoid this folly, his chief of security warns him: “You will hit traffic that speaks in quarter inches” (11). Eric, though, is unrelenting. DeLillo uses the glacial pace to great comic effect as Eric routinely exits the becalmed limo to go to a bookstore and various other assignments. He is continually running into Elise Shifrin, his wife of twenty-two days, heiress to a banking fortune, and poet—though her poetry, Eric notes, “was shit” (16). The limo itself is a hive of activity. It is less a conveyance than a command centre, a rolling trading floor outfitted with the bleeding-edge technology so new that it had hardly been invented: “The context was nearly touchless. He could talk most systems into operation or wave a hand at a screen and make it go blank” (13). Here Eric holds court with his various advisors, including his currency analyst, personal physician, and various chiefs (of security, technology, finance, and theory). While driven by the seemingly banal goal of getting a haircut in the old neighbourhood, Eric’s attention is fixated on the financial markets. Leveraging his considerable resources to the hilt, Eric makes a speculative play on the yen, a wager of global significance: “He wanted all the yen there was” (97). When the yen improbably rises in value, counter to his sophisticated forecasting models and intuitive sense of the market, he faces ruin. Due to the scale of his bet, his losses initiate a cascading series of defaults.

There were currencies tumbling everywhere. Bank failures were spreading. He found the humidors and lit a cigar. Strategists could not explain the speed and depth of the fall. They opened their mouths and words came out. He knew it was the yen. His actions regarding the yen were causing storms of disorder. He was so leveraged, his firm’s portfolio large and sprawling linked crucially to the affairs of

³ One of them, the managing director of the IMF, is murdered live on the Money Channel during a visit to Pyongyang. The implication that even recalcitrant North Korea is caught up in the circuits of global commerce—the killing takes place after “a historic day and night of ceremonies, receptions, dinners, speeches and toasts” (33)—is one of the many small touches deftly illustrating the omnipresence of the market in *Cosmopolis*.

so many key institutions, all reciprocally vulnerable, that the whole system was in danger. (115-116)

All of this occurs, as the novel's frontispiece declares: "In the Year 2000: A Day in April." DeLillo is clearly presenting Eric Packer as an allegorical figure for the excesses of what Nobel prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz calls the "roaring Nineties" and the mythic source of their collapse. "He knew they would figure it out eventually, how he'd made it happen, one man" (140). He is the fictional patient zero held responsible for the all-too-real plague of "contagion" that infected equity markets in April 2000 (after peaking on March 10, the NASDAQ stock index slid, losing a quarter of its value by April 4).

The collapse of the New Economy, of course, is nowhere near as simple as that. For one thing, a rogue currency trader was not the immediate culprit for the 2000 crash, which had more to do systemic problems in the technology sector that reached a tipping point in concert with a couple of (un)timely developments. First, there was the ruling handed down on April 3 by U. S. District Court Judge Thomas Penfield Jackson that found Microsoft guilty of violating antitrust laws. The uncertain fate of the leading technology company cast a pall over the entire industry. Second, there were expectations that U.S. Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan would announce an interest rate hike in May. This would increase the cost of capital and slow down the economy—a problem for many dot-com stocks because they were, quite literally, growth industries and little more. As David Denby, a neophyte investor who maintained a diary of his irrational exuberance as he bought in as the major stock indices bottomed out, ruefully explains: "Profit growth must continue at the same rate or better for prices to continue moving up

—that was the inexorable logic of a long-running bull [market] I hadn't quite understood a year earlier" (199). This period was infamous for companies that had yet to turn a profit (or, for that matter, produce anything) raising staggering amounts of money. Stock values were grossly distorted in the absence of traditional measures (how could analysts calculate the price-to-earnings ratio for new economy companies that had yet to earn anything?). And without these measures, investors bought on optimism alone. This lasted as long as there was a ready supply of capital to feed the frenzy. But Greenspan's interest rate announcement threatened to dry up the necessary liquidity. "Stripped of the element of belief," Roger Lowenstein explains, "dot-coms had nothing to sustain them" (*Origins of the Crash* 158).

The events of early April 2000, then, cannot be laid at the feet of any individual actor. It had more to do with a widespread crisis in confidence, one that was quickly engulfed by the wave of corporate corruption scandals following closely in the wake of the stock market meltdown.⁴ And yet, the situation DeLillo describes in *Cosmopolis*—a catastrophe in the global financial markets attributable to a single player—does have a real world analogue. Eric's failed yen play, his certainty that the currency could not go any higher, recalls Julian Robertson's similarly massive bet in 1998.⁵ Robertson, whose Tiger Management was one of the heavyweights in the hedge fund industry with more than \$20 billion in capital under management, shorted the yen in 1998 as a wave of

⁴ Admittedly, that new figure of public opprobrium, the disgraced executive forced to undergo the ritual humiliation of the "perp-walk," lends credence to the notion that the market collapse was due to individual avarice rather than the cyclical nature of the economy.

⁵ "The yen itself knew it could not go higher. But it did go higher, time and again" (*Cosmopolis* 84).

instability roiled Asian markets.⁶ By borrowing the yen and selling it at its then-current price with the understanding that it must be bought back at some agreed-upon later date and returned to the initial broker, Robertson presumed that in the interim the value of the currency would fall and he would pocket the difference.

Betting on capital flight from the troubled region, Robertson was unpleasantly surprised as the yen began to strengthen against expectations in the waning months of 1998. This posed a potentially crippling difficulty for the short-seller. As Eric himself discovers in *Cosmopolis*, “the stronger the yen became, the more money he needed to pay back the loan” (84). In all, Tiger Management lost billions (including a one-day \$2 billion hit). This miscalculation, in turn, spooked investors who began to flee from the fund, which was reduced from \$20 billion to just over \$6 billion when it closed up shop in March of 2000. Of course, Eric’s similar yen-sparked meltdown happens much more quickly. “It happens much faster in the novel because everything happens faster in a novel” notes DeLillo. “And that’s the reason behind the exaggerated reality. There’s a sense of acceleration of time and of reality itself” (Barron). As Eric’s chief of finance warns him, “We have a yen carry that could crush us in *hours*” (40, italics mine). In fact, the fallout from his actions is felt everywhere near-instantaneously. For example, when Eric inadvertently finds himself on a movie set later that day, filming stops abruptly because, as he is told, “the financing has collapsed. Happened in seconds apparently. Money all gone. This is the last scene they’re shooting before they suspend indefinitely” (175).

⁶ Paul Krugman offers a useful summary of Robertson’s gamble. See “Tiger’s Tale” in *Slate* magazine.

While Julian Robertson's disastrous bet on the yen offers perhaps the most direct inspiration for *Cosmopolis*, this chapter will draw a much more elaborate parallel between the fictional Packer Capital and the real-life hedge fund Long-Term Capital Management (LTCM).⁷ Like Robertson's Tiger, Long-Term was a top-tier fund staffed by the brightest lights in the financial firmament. It wasn't quite as large (at its peak it had approximately \$7 billion under management) but through aggressive leveraging it exerted influence out of all scale to its actual equity base. Long-Term borrowed funds using investor capital as collateral, and then borrowed some more, using the initial round of loans as collateral for the next round, and on and on. Leveraging is a common-enough practice in the financial industry, but what set LTCM apart was its determination to take this process to its logical conclusion, described by Nicholas Dunbar as a vision of "zero capital and infinite leverage" (190). Within a few short years, Long Term was so highly leveraged that it was implicated in a series of side deals with a host of partners totaling over a trillion dollars worth of both direct and indirect exposure. Its braintrust had such faith in their ability to hedge out any possible risks to their various positions, they effectively believed that their trades would become self-sustaining, profits carried onwards and upwards by virtue of their own momentum. Their ultimate strategy was to dispense with collateral altogether because anything held 'outside' of the market exerted drag on what was otherwise potentially unlimited growth. Collateral was no longer seen in terms as insurance, part of the cost of doing business, but as friction, a stubborn pebble of resistance eventually to be dissolved by the liquidity of the global financial markets. After several years of massive,

⁷ My thanks to Riyaz Lalani for his comments on Long-Term Capital Management and for pointing me to Roger Lowenstein's excellent work on this topic.

market-leading returns, though, the unthinkable happened. The global financial instability that spawned the “Asian flu” which infected Tiger Management hit Long-Term with unprecedented speed and force, taking it to the brink in a few short months. Unable to imagine that their sophisticated forecasting models could malfunction simultaneously and lacking the collateral to cover a host of suddenly bad bets, Long-Term faced insolvency. The prospect that a defunct LTCM would be unable to honour its massive commitments sparked panic. Due to the size of its position in the market, a single player had imperiled the stability of the global financial markets, prompting the U.S. government and a consortium of leading banks to intervene and bail out the troubled fund.⁸

Cosmopolis, then, has something of a ripped-from-the-headlines quality to it.⁹

Eric’s highly-leveraged wager on the yen recalls Robertson’s similar leap (and splat). The global financial turmoil set off by Packer Capital’s meltdown, meanwhile, realizes in fictional form the consequences of Long-Term’s near-disastrous failure.¹⁰ DeLillo is after more here, though, than seeking out plot points on which to hang a financial thriller. By incorporating these recent financial disorders into his narrative, DeLillo provides a thoroughgoing critique of the mindset that is to a large degree responsible for generating them. As I will explain below, the LTCM debacle and Packer’s folly stem from a shared

⁸ A scene dramatized in Kate Jennings’ *Moral Hazard* and discussed in the introduction.

⁹ Mark Greif, in his unfavorable review of *Cosmopolis* (“this book repeats watery versions of the stupidest analyses of the present which are so unmindful of real conditions as to be neither of the left nor the right”), misses out on this completely. DeLillo’s emphasis on finance leads Greif to conclude, rather incredibly, that the author “has written a novel of the 1980s.” His evident unfamiliarity with Wall Street’s continuing relevance into the 1990s and beyond encourages him to reduce *Cosmopolis*’s financial subject matter to little more than a periodizing trope (i.e. a tagline for the ‘greedy’ 1980s).

¹⁰ William Gaddis offers a fictional antecedent for financial collapse: the JR Corporation created by an eleven-year-old speculator in *JR*. Gaddis’ novel, published in 1975, is beyond the scope of my dissertation, but given that it was composed during the very period when financialization began to overtake the American economy as a whole, it offers a promising avenue to further develop and provide historical context for the argument that I have made here.

belief: “There’s a common surface, an affinity between market movements and the natural world” (86). Convinced of their ability to intuit this surface, both the financial engineers at Long-Term and their fictional counterpart in *Cosmopolis* effectively believe that the market is not *like* nature, but nature itself (and vice versa), investing their forecasting models with the same inevitability as natural processes. Not to put too fine a point on it, they take a leap of faith that these models, having attained a certain level of sophistication and complexity, are indistinguishable from the reality they are supposed to represent. In this chapter I will explore the roots of their shared hubris, which DeLillo describes elsewhere as the desire “to live permanently in the future, in the utopian glow of cyber-capital” (“In the Ruins of the Future” 33).

Unfolding in three broad movements, this chapter examines how DeLillo’s critique of cyber-capital plays out in a variety of contexts. The first turns to the initial critical response to *Cosmopolis*. Widely—and unfairly—panned, DeLillo’s latest effort revived the longstanding charge that his characters lack motivation. This complaint is generated by deep-seated resistance to what Mark Edmundson calls DeLillo’s “economies of self-representation... how the self is figured as existing in fields of force and as exerting power in its turn” (114). Dismissing the familiar model of the self-contained individual as outdated, DeLillo explores how the “forces and energies” of our time saturate the self. The second section of the chapter moves from character to setting by focusing on New York, the cosmopolis of *Cosmopolis*. What DeLillo calls the desire to live in the future has a history. I contend that the emergence of cyber-capital as a cosmopolitical ideal is directly realized in New York’s transformation over the last few

decades from a modern industrial metropolis to a postmodern information cosmopolis. Accordingly, I will examine how representations of New York have evolved over the course of DeLillo's career. The third section contrasts *Cosmopolis* with the New Economy context that it self-consciously employs and interrogates, particularly the Long-Term Capital Management meltdown. I will conclude with a brief meditation on haircuts, a topic that inspired no end of incredulity and hostility among the novel's reviewers, to whom I will now turn.

“SEXUALLY CHARGED FINANCIAL GIBBERISH”¹¹

Reviewers did not quite know what to make of *Cosmopolis*. Expectations were high for the 2003 novel, DeLillo's first after 1997's *Underworld*, widely considered to be his masterpiece.¹² Initial responses ranged from lukewarm to scornful; unambiguously positive ones were hard to find,¹³ especially among the major outlets self-consciously responsible for adjudicating matters of taste. The *New York Times* commissioned not one but two harshly critical notices, with Walter Kirn dismissing *Cosmopolis* as “fossilized academic futurism” (“Long Day's Journey into Haircut”) and senior book critic Michiko Kakutani describing DeLillo's latest as “a major dud” (“Headed Towards a Crash”). *The Independent's* Graham Caveney castigates DeLillo for “the po-faced grandeur of his conceit,” suggesting that *Cosmopolis* “is monologue masquerading as dialogue; fragments

¹¹ The dismissive—if not entirely inaccurate—judgment of John Freeman of the *St. Petersburg Times*.

¹² That's not to lose sight of *The Body Artist*, a short novella released in 2001.

¹³ Though see Corbett, Kipen, McLaughlin, Park and Phillip as examples.

of a soliloquy that relish their own aphoristic wisdom.” John Updike, writing in *The New Yorker*, faults DeLillo for letting his fascination with ideas compromise characterization to the extent that “implausibility reigns unchecked” (“One-Way Street”). While not all of the reviews were so negative, the scathing judgment of reviewers became something of a story in itself.¹⁴ Catching the scent of blood in the water, a second wave of critical attention soon followed, this time focusing on the novel’s controversial reception (see Begley, Campbell, Cook, Morrison, Powers).¹⁵ The tone of these pieces tended toward either gleeful *schadenfreude* at the mugging of a critical darling or mild disapproval with the unseemly behaviour of literary philistines suddenly turning on a once-favored son. “Some of the negative press is obviously a reaction against years of fawning,” explains Adam Begley of *The London Times*. His own assessment was more measured, but hardly reassuring to DeLillo’s standard bearers; *Cosmopolis* is “unlucky thirteen... not one of DeLillo’s better novels” (“Stuck in the Slow Lane”).¹⁶

Much of the resistance to *Cosmopolis* can be ascribed to Eric Packer who is perhaps DeLillo’s most disliked protagonist. It’s a fairly impressive accomplishment given that the author’s roster includes a rogues’ gallery of wannabe terrorists (Lyle Wynant of *Players*), terminally self-involved waste management executives (Nick Shay of *Underworld*), not to mention presidential assassins (Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra*). “Packer is promiscuous, greedy, selfish, brusque, dishonest and cold—and those are his good qualities,” charges Ron Franschell (“DeLillo’s Ode to Joyce”). “One is reluctant to

¹⁴ For other unflattering assessments, see Skidelsky, Freeman, and Greif.

¹⁵ The title of Brian Cook’s piece says it all: “Loving to Hate Don DeLillo”.

¹⁶ *Cosmopolis* is DeLillo’s thirteenth published novel.

call Eric a consciousness. His is a deeply inconsistent but wholly loathsome character,” notes Mark Greif (“Bonfire of the Verities”). “He’s a cartoon nihilist, a comic-strip capitalist pig,” sputters Michiko Kakutani, “a monster of arrogance, vulgarity and contempt” (“Headed Towards a Crash”). “It’s not hard to see Eric Packer as an incarnation of evil, a diabolical sociopath and crypto-fascist who plays out his fantasies of domination and personal hegemony in the arena of global finance,” Jerry Varsava concludes (104). Even more measured reactions that go to the trouble of weighing Eric’s finer qualities against his deficits find him wanting. Pointing out that Eric is as cultured and well-read as he is monstrous, critic David Cowart suggests the point that DeLillo is trying to make is “that taste, connoisseurship, and other such corollaries to great wealth must not be thought to confer moral distinction.” In other words, “Eric Packer remains, for all his love of poetry and painting, a son of a bitch” (“Anxieties of Obsolescence” 187).

Making no concessions to sentiment in his depiction of characters like Eric, DeLillo seems fated to be more respected than loved. As the response to *Cosmopolis* demonstrates, he is seen as a writer less interested in people than ideas and as all-too-willing to sacrifice the lived quality of relationships on the page to the cause of the language he uses to express them. There is nothing particularly new in this line of criticism—it rehashes a common complaint about the author early in his career, when he was seen as a precocious talent whose pointed observations and glassy prose obscured the beating heart of his stories. All that changed with the publication of *White Noise* (1985) and *Libra* (1988). By the 1990s, he was seen as a major author who had finally arrived.

White Noise revealed his humanity and *Libra*, with its fictional (re)construction of the JFK assassination conspiracy, made a strong claim for the status of “great American novel” given its magisterial treatment of a national obsession. “Though always a concept-driven writer, whose characters spout smart, swift essays at one another,” suggests Updike, “[DeLillo] has shown himself—in large parts of *Underworld*, in almost all of *White Noise*—capable of realism’s patient surfaces and saturation in personally verified detail” (“One-Way Street”). However, like *Mao II* (1991) and his earlier work, *Cosmopolis* embraces a form of literary asceticism that pares rich character interactions into Socratic dialogue. In it, Graham Caveney charges, “DeLillo wants to blend cultural theory with storytelling in such a way as to question the stability of both” (2003).

Attributing such mandarin motives to DeLillo has proven a favorite strategy among critics eager to dismiss what they see as creeping experimentalism from the literary mainstream. For this reason—and contrary to the fact that he is he is widely reviewed and enjoys respectable sales—he is often dismissed as an author of solely academic appeal. Among the reviewers of *Cosmopolis*, Emma Brockes describes DeLillo as enjoying “popularity with a certain pedantic strain of male graduate” (“View from the bridge”) while James Woods unfavorably compares the musings of various characters in the novel to the “Baudrillard-bruised language evocative of an assistant professor of cultural studies with, alas, an MFA” (“Traffic”). Eager to reclaim the realist novel from postmodernist barbarians at the gate, unfriendly critics have even drafted DeLillo into the culture wars, albeit as an unwilling combatant. In a famous execration of *Libra*, DeLillo’s take on the

Kennedy assassination, conservative pundit George Will declared the author a bad citizen for upsetting the lone-gunman applecart.¹⁷

What really exercises DeLillo's detractors—even moreso than his determination to wade into the arena of contemporary culture and fashion art from politically charged material—is a perennial complaint about the flatness of his characters.¹⁸ That's not to say his characters are one-dimensional or lacking in passion or appetite. Rather, their internal conflicts rarely play out in the expected dramatic fashion. Instead of signaling psychological tension, they often appear suspended. Contrasting claims on the individual's attention (or desires) are held in abeyance as the conflicts themselves seep out into the outside world, where they are consequently experienced as fundamentally alien, threatening, and intrusive. This, no doubt, is why so many critics see DeLillo as a literary conspiracy theorist and purveyor of paranoia (Knight, Melley, O'Donnell). Readers, in turn, are alienated from characters that they do not recognize as sharing their psychology as the author thwarts their attempts to identify with the characters on the page. Accordingly, *The New Republic's* James Woods accuses DeLillo of having a “mainly theoretical interest in human beings” (“Traffic”). Walter Kirn complains that although “Don DeLillo gives his characters names, he might as well just assign them serial numbers” (“Long Day's Journey”). Even critics who are supportive of the author and write favorably of *Cosmopolis* concur. Tim Adams points out:

There has always been an almost autistic quality to DeLillo's characterization, in that he habitually makes the people in his novels perfect strangers in their own

¹⁷ Will's review has been reprinted in *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engles, eds. For a discussion of this episode, see Lentricchia.

¹⁸ Tony Tanner's reading of *Underworld's* Nick Shay is representative: “Like nearly all of DeLillo's characters—call them voices—he seems to aspire to the condition of anonymity” (211).

worlds. With Eric Packer, traveling armor-plated and sound-proofed through the tumult, the author takes this solipsism to a logical extreme. (Adams, “A Big Apple a Day”)

Many critics find this authorial strategy jarring since it undercuts their basic assumptions about the novel-form, particularly given what Edmundson describes as the “entrenched conservatism in representing character” (122). A serious novel hews to psychological realism, which is not simply the representation of consciousness, but of consciousness from the perspective of a self-contained, autonomous individual striding purposefully across the world like an actor on a stage.¹⁹

DeLillo tersely dismisses this notion of selfhood as anachronistic. “I don’t dote on my characters, which I take to be a nineteenth century pastime that’s survived in a rather robust form,” he explains in a 1998 interview with Richard Williams of *The Guardian* (“Everything Under the Bomb”).²⁰ For those who see the novel as the high-water mark of literary humanism, DeLillo’s obdurate attitude on the question of character raises troubling questions about literary aesthetics *and* ethics. In his final verdict, for example, Wood sees *Cosmopolis* as not simply a bad novel, but as bad *for* the novel:

Cosmopolis, so eager to tell us about our age, to bring back the news, delivers a kind of information, and delivers it in such a way that it finally threatens the existence of the novel form. For in what way does this novel tell us something about the world that only the novel form could tell us? (“Traffic”)

The implication, of course, is that DeLillo has hijacked the novel form in the service of polemic or cultural theory; that the novel, if it is about anything, is about character; and

¹⁹ See my discussion of MacPherson’s classic treatment of possessive individualism in the introduction.

²⁰ His formative reading experiences, DeLillo tells David Remnick, began with the discovery of modernist masterpieces like *Ulysses*: “I didn’t take to nineteenth century English material at all. It was a great struggle, a great burden. I couldn’t concentrate on it” (“Exile on Main Street” 138). On DeLillo’s assessment of the persistence of nineteenth century realism in the twenty-first century, see his discussion with Helena de Bertodano.

that human experience itself is universal and unchanging. DeLillo disputes these claims, offering language as the equal to character²¹ and suggesting that since psychological realism is outdated, its typical narrative strategies presume characters no longer indigenous to the contemporary moment.²²

My work doesn't offer the comforts of other kinds of fiction, work that suggests that our lives and our problems and our perceptions are no different today than they were fifty or sixty years ago. I don't offer comforts except those that lurk in comedy and in structure and in language, and the comedy is probably not all that soothing. But before everything, there's language. Before history and politics, there's language. And it's language, the sheer pleasure of making it and bending it and seeing it form on the page and hearing it whistle in my head—this is the thing that makes my work go. And art can be exhilarating despite the darkness—and there's certainly much darker material than mine—if the reader is sensitive to the music. What I try to do is create complex human beings, ordinary-extraordinary men and women who live in the particular skin of the late twentieth century. I try to record what I see and hear and sense around me—what I feel in the currents, the electric stuff of the culture. I think these are American forces and energies. And they belong to our time. (Begley “The Art of Fiction” 107)

DeLillo discomfits because the complexity of his characters does not necessarily correspond with depth.²³ Confounding the expectations of psychological realism, DeLillo ruthlessly refuses his readers the comforts of identification, although as he admits above, fleeting consolations can be found elsewhere in his prose, whether in the form of language or sly comedy. By refusing to make a category distinction between his characters and the various cultural discourses that interpenetrate and interpellate them

²¹ In a perceptive survey of DeLillo's oeuvre up to *Libra*, Arnold Weinstein praises the author, particularly his ear “for the private jargons and codes of today's technocratic society” and for his concern with rendering for us “sounds we have heard without knowing it—the ‘white noise’ of our Muzak age” (289). For a book-length study of language in DeLillo's oeuvre, see Cowart (2002).

²² Interestingly, in his reviews of *Underworld* and *Cosmopolis*, Wood brings in Henry James in order to make a decidedly unfavourable, if untimely, comparison.

²³ To give but one example, DeLillo tells Anthony DeCurtis that in *Ratner's Star* the “characters are intentionally flattened and cartoonlike” (67).

—“the language of waves and radiation” (*White Noise* 326)—he suggests that what is most captivating about contemporary experience is the manner in which we are embedded in and exposed to distinctively “American forces and energies.”²⁴

From his very first book (1971’s *Americana*), DeLillo has relentlessly staged the confrontation between new, spectral forms of determination (“forces and energies”) and a shopworn conception of identity, one no longer appropriate to the present moment. His characters are sometimes unrecognizable as such (though not strictly “unbelievable” as some critics would have it) because the author recognizes that the conditions that originally dictated the emergence of the modern self—specifically its *characteristic* dimension of interiority—have changed. In their wake, DeLillo is interested in the way that identity is produced in the dialectical interplay between individuals and social formations; the way in which *we are what we crowd around*, whether in terms of sports (hockey in *Amazons*, football in *End Zone*, baseball in *Underworld*) or media (advertising in *Americana*, rock’n’roll in *Great Jones Street*, television in *White Noise*). Furthermore, the strong self that precedes these identifications is revealed to be a mirage. While it is hardly revolutionary to suggest that our sense of agency arises at the intersection of self and other, that only the psychotic is so rigidly bounded as to keep the world out, and that identity is ultimately bound up in difference, what is of note in DeLillo’s writing is that the distinction itself is fading. “DeLillo’s most extreme figures aren’t flat or round; they aren’t, strictly speaking, present at all,” explains Edmundson. “[They] record and

²⁴ DeLillo’s distinctive perspective, he tells an interviewer, stems from the “attempt to place myself in the midst of the crowd” (Nadotti 111).

broadcast what's out there in the mass-culture ether, virtually unqualified, uncut, by private critical response" (119-20).

If any one event resonates through all of DeLillo's work, it is the 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy, famously described by the author as "the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century" (*Libra* 181). For a writer obsessed with the power of the image in the society of the spectacle, the murder of the telegenic president marked a decisive shift in American culture as the first truly *mediated* event. Kennedy's assassination drastically levels the distinction between public event and private experience.²⁵ It was the first national trauma that was collectively experienced in all its searing immediacy (giving rise to the question: where were you when...?) and compulsively repeated via the Talmudic parsing of the Zapruder film. What we might describe as DeLillo's immersive aesthetic, his decision to dwell in the skin of his characters and the twentieth century, tracing the surface common to both, stems directly from this watershed moment. At the same time, the unresolved questions about the assassination, "the uncertainty we feel about the basic facts that surround the case," has threatened our grip on reality (Begley "The Art of Fiction" 103). Secret plots threaten to overwhelm the national narrative. The "shattering randomness of the event" introduces a new element into American culture: the missing motive ("The Art of Fiction" 103).

The missing motive exerts an uncanny force on all aspects of DeLillo's fiction. It also explains why tragic catharsis is strangely absent from his fiction. "In the world of DeLillo's major novels dialectical encounter is impossible," explains Mark Edmundson (114). What Edmundson terms dialectical encounter lies at the heart of our assumptions

²⁵ A topic discussed with great acuity by Jeremy Green in *Late Postmodernism* (163-184).

about character, namely that it is forged through struggle. DeLillo's fiction runs counter to the "agonistic mode of Western character" because the possibilities for struggle are vitiated (114). The Kennedy assassination symbolizes this new state of affairs. The death of the president has a dual significance: it stands for both the defeat of a centralized, hierarchical conception of power and for the ascendancy of a new type of conspiratorial power that flows in subterranean currents and is dispersed over hidden networks. "Crudely put, the king is dead, the father, too," says Edmundson. "The kind of power DeLillo renders exists everywhere and nowhere. It is impossible to confront" (114, 116). A strong sense of self-identity (the sort demonstrated by clearly *motivated* behaviour) requires the staging of this confrontation. Without it, DeLillo's plots turn more on structural irony than dramatic conflict, generating tension through symmetry rather than personality.

For example, Eric's odyssey through the streets of Manhattan in *Cosmopolis* is interrupted by the insertion of two chapters that intrude upon and disrupt the larger narrative. Presented as two entries from the "spiritual autobiography" of someone writing as Benno Levin, they at first appear to be the confused ramblings of a homeless person. Levin, though, is the nom-de-plume of Richard Sheets, a one-time Packer Capital employee who is responsible for the "credible threat" on Eric's life at the outset of the narrative. This is much more than a case of a disgruntled former worker. "I watched the live video feed from his website all the time. I watched for hours and realistically days," he writes. "Even though I worked in the same headquarters I waited out on the street to see him leave. I wanted to pinpoint him in my mind. It was important to know where he

was, even for a moment. It put my world in order” (151). Sheets’ fixation on his ex-boss elevates him to the status of missing motive—it is Eric who renders his world consistent and intelligible. But when Eric shuts down his website, Sheets is no longer able to orient himself.²⁶ Consumed with uncertainty and “dwindling down financially to nothing,” Sheets faces a moment of decision (151). “I am determined finally to act. It is the violent act that makes history and changes everything that came before” (154). As he tells his former boss in the novel’s climax, “you’re a figure whose thoughts and acts affect everybody, people, everywhere.... You have to die for how you think and act” (202).

In Edmundson’s terms, *Cosmopolis* adopts the structure of a missed encounter. Levin’s “confessions” play out in reverse and occur chronologically during (Morning: 149-155) and *after* (Night: 55-61) the events told from Eric’s perspective, which lead up to but do not include the shooting (209). The climatic moment in the confrontation between Eric and his erstwhile assassin, the moment of Eric’s murder, never actually occurs within the narrative. *Cosmopolis* revolves around but never directly touches Eric’s death. By elevating the missed encounter to a structural principle, DeLillo anchors his work within the tragic tradition while ultimately refusing its morose consolations. Just as the missing motive opens up a breach between the reader and the characters on the page, thwarting identification, the missed encounter confers a strangely static, suspended

²⁶ His confused state is best exemplified in the following passage, where he slips between pronouns in referring to himself:

I advertised clandestinely for a used gun and bought it subtly and privately when I was online and still employed but barely, knowing the day was coming, he is erratic, his work habits are disintegrating, which was visible in their faces, despite the humour and pathos of owning such a complicated weapon for a person such as me. (152)

quality on the proceedings. Without satisfactory resolution—because there can be no final confrontation—tension steadily builds with no prospect for cathartic release.

Describing one of his earlier novels to an interviewer, DeLillo tells him: “I had a setting and some characters, and I more or less trailed behind, listening.” It’s an approach he doesn’t stray far from in *Cosmopolis*, where the plot *feels* similarly haphazard because the narrative arc is remarkably flat. It refuses to conform to any conventional affective trajectory, in part because the reader is already emotionally distanced from the characters on the page. “There’s an aimless shuffle toward a high-intensity event,” he notes. “Then... there’s a kind of decline, a purposeful loss of energy” (Begley “The Art of Fiction” 93). DeLillo’s entropic style deliberately cuts against the grain of literary convention and dissents from the humanistic tradition out of which the novel first emerged. Accordingly, I would like to suggest that in the same way that the critical frenzy over *American Psycho* masked an incoherent response to that novel’s formal innovations, *Cosmopolis*’s decidedly mixed reception has a great deal to do with entrenched resistance to DeLillo’s career-long interrogation of late capitalist subjectivity. In fact, *Cosmopolis* is only the latest example of DeLillo’s intuition that character—or at least the traditional conception of identity underpinning it—is in the throes of a collateral crisis, which is to say, *a crisis in the concept of collateral*.

What is meant by collateral in this context? Quite simply that there is something held apart from the circuits of social exchange, a surety or supplement that props it up as a symbolic edifice. In terms of character, this guarantee is nothing other than one’s sense of interiority or self-*possession*. Properly speaking, *identity* is what hinders *full*

identification with the social order in which we are otherwise enmeshed. The subjective experience of interiority creates “another place” within every individual, a private realm incommensurable with public experience. The crisis stems from the fact that barriers between public and private worlds are failing; interiority is subsumed—rationalized—by the logic of development. Our exposure is increasing in both existential and economic terms as more of our collateral is put at stake, which is to say, as the self is put into circulation. “The world is supposed to mean something that’s self-contained. But nothing is self-contained. Everything enters something else,” laments *Cosmopolis*’s Benno Levin. “This is why I can only pretend to be someone” (60).

THE ABSTRACTION OF NEW YORK

While Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County may be the most recognized fictional landscape in American literature, Don DeLillo’s New York is particularly fascinating because of the way the city itself evolves in his novels. Born and raised in the Bronx, the author, except for sojourns in Greece and Toronto, has lived in and around New York for most of his life. “I became a writer by living in New York and seeing and hearing and feeling all the great, amazing and dangerous things the city endlessly assembles,” he explains to one interviewer (Bing). Citing its artistic ferment, the museums, the galleries, the multicultural whirl, DeLillo tells another interviewer: “New York itself was an enormous influence” (DiPietro 16). Gotham certainly occupies a privileged position in DeLillo’s imagination. From the opening page of his first novel *Americana* (“The santas

of Fifth Avenue rang their little bells with an odd sad delicacy, as if sprinkling salt on some brutally spoiled piece of meat”) to Eric Packer’s mid-town Manhattan odyssey (or Packeriad, as Ed Park quips), New York is not simply a reliable, unchanging setting, a backdrop against which character interactions stand out, but an ongoing social experiment. In fact, a broad arc can be traced from his earliest fiction to his most recent whereby the cosmopolitan city becomes a cosmopolis. With apologies to urbanist Robert Fitch, one might think of this process as the *abstraction* of New York.

Fitch, author of *The Assassination of New York*, argues that seemingly impersonal structural transformations in the city’s economy since the 1970s constituted a class war on the part of wealthy landowners against the New York’s (heavily unionized) manufacturing base. “If revolutions are festivals for the poor, New York’s ever-recurrent fiscal crises are tailgate parties for the rich,” he explains. “Municipal workers’ wages and pensions never recovered. Welfare allowances fell by one-third. The city imposed tuition on poor students at CUNY. It got rid of the stock exchange tax, halved the personal income tax, and set the real estate tax at a record low” (x). Acting in the interest of the propertied class, city planners actively encouraged the deindustrialization of New York in order to put real estate (in the form of docklands, factories, and warehouses) to more profitable use as office towers and luxury housing. In this reading, New York’s phoenix-like rebirth after the 1975 fiscal crisis, emerging as the centre of gravity in the postmodern economy, was fuelled by a windfall in rents.²⁷ New York, one might say, was immolated in the FIRE of what David Harvey calls “flexible accumulation.” FIRE is an acronym for finance,

²⁷ “There is a nearly 1000 percent spread between the rent received for factory space and the rent landlords get for class A office space. Simply by changing the land use, one’s capital could increase in value many times” (Fitch, xii)

insurance, and real estate: the brightest stars of this new economic firmament and, more importantly, the putative tenants of all this newly constructed office space. Flexible accumulation, meanwhile, “is characterized by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation” (147).

Flexibility is a crucial attribute of the post-industrial economy; Harvey contrasts it with the “rigidity” of Fordism, which was premised on corporate giantism (in terms of mammoth organization, long-term and large-scale capital investments, mass production, economies of scale, etc.). A regime of flexible accumulation seeks to shed commitments whether in terms of depreciating equipment or a restive workforce. “It rests upon flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products and patterns of consumption,” says Harvey (147). Flexibility translates into fleetness as the economic system speeds up, both in terms of production (e.g. ‘just-in-time’ inventory management, containerization of the shipping industry, etc.) and consumption (the increasing velocity of fashion and volatility of styles). In concert with this acceleration, the world itself appears to shrink. As a barrier to economic activity and development, distance is overcome both in a relative sense (due to improvements in travel and transportation) and an absolute one (cyberspace, for example, transcends physical constraints like location). “Time-space compression,” as Harvey describes this process, “has had a disorienting and disruptive impact upon political-economic practices, the balance of class power, as well as upon social and cultural life” (284). More pertinently, flexibility and time-space

compression exert serious torsion on city life. In DeLillo's New York, the transition from industrial metropolis to post-industrial cosmopolis generates enormous tension, first rending and then mending the urban fabric, albeit in new and barely recognizable configurations.

The industrial metropolis is organized around the physical manifestation of productive forces: fixed capital in the form of shipyards, machinery, factories, etc. The postmodern cosmopolis, in contrast, is a largely symbolic affair. There is no overwhelming necessity dictating its location since the fixed capital needs of an information economy are radically downshifted. Because the decentralized, dispersed and virtual economic model it presumes is (notionally, at least) everywhere, its actual footprint can be anywhere. A server farm, for example, is relatively portable where a smelter is absolutely not. There is an exception to this, of course. As fixed capital recedes into the background (offshored, miniaturized, and made virtual), human capital comes to the fore. The material fact of human bodies, not bandwidth or processor speed, is the main physical constraint on the information economy. *We* are not nearly as flexible as the productive forces that Harvey describes. The status of the body in DeLillo's fiction generally and *Cosmopolis* in particular is a topic I will touch on below. For now, however, I want to excavate the prehistory of cyber-capital by turning to representations of New York in DeLillo's *oeuvre*.

The abstraction (or assassination) of New York can be framed in a relatively simple formula: real places are replaced by notional spaces, creating spatial disorientation and anxiety. This fuels a powerful nostalgic surge for "old neighbourhoods" like the

Bronx in *Underworld* and Hell's Kitchen in *Cosmopolis* as well as other similarly manageable locales—manageable in that they can be cognitively mapped.²⁸ Spatial abstraction, though, is only a part of the story. As Harvey insists, it is accompanied by temporal confusion. As the economy speeds up, it begins to overtake the future, quite literally in the case of velocities achieved by the financial markets. “Futures markets in everything, from corn to pork bellies to currencies and government debt, coupled with the ‘securitization’ of all kinds of temporary and floating debts, illustrate techniques for discounting the future into the present” (Harvey 292). These techniques require the rationalization of future income streams, the ability to accurately calculate future revenues and render them commensurable to one another, exchangeable. A good example of this accelerated securitization took place in the early 1980s as home mortgages, individually too small to be worth trading on the open market, were pooled together and sold as bonds: mortgage-backed securities. This provided a massive infusion of capital to stoke the already red-hot financial markets, but more importantly, it demonstrates how securitization quantifies an uncertain future (represented here as mortgage payments). To the degree that the future is rendered knowable, measurable and predictable, it is no longer the future. For this reason, Randy Martin argues that “financialization implies an extreme form of presentism... [naturalizing] the present so that no future is imaginable” (108).

²⁸ The proliferation of men in small rooms in DeLillo's fiction has sometimes been read as the author's striving for a claustrophobic atmosphere, but that tends to overlook the fact that for most of these men (for example, Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra* or Taft Robinson in *End Zone*), confinement is freely chosen and largely self-imposed. For men caught up in plots of world-historical significance and kicking at the undertow of history, a small room offers welcome respite in that it is possible to banish complexity and abstraction in favour of simple details. To the degree that a small room is a *space* capable of being organized to human scale, it becomes (reverts to) a *place*.

Taken together, time-space compression produces an abstract space and bland futurity that are ultimately indistinguishable from one another. DeLillo's fiction explores what feels like to *live* this convergence. Since his career broadly tracks the emergence of New York as the financial centre of the postmodern economy, he is particularly well placed to theorize this neoliberal transition. In what follows, I will revisit some of his early fiction from the mid-1970s in order to see how this evolution in productive forces, this passage from Fordist to flexible regimes of accumulation, this seemingly anonymous and inexorable tide of structural change is refracted through the twin spectacles of time-space compression, specifically financialization (temporal compression) and gentrification (spatial compression). In *Great Jones Street* (1973), for example, DeLillo chronicles urban blight and social decay on the Lower East Side at the very moment of its transformation into the nexus of the Manhattan art scene. In the experimental novel *Ratner's Star* (1976), New York is entirely absent,²⁹ but DeLillo performs a wide-ranging critique of the theoretically-oriented mindset that generates abstractions capable of physically reshaping New York's skyline. In fact, it is to the skyline I will turn in my discussion of *Players* (1977), the novel that most clearly anticipates the advent of cyber-capital. Of particular note is the "debut" of the World Trade Center. Appearing in five of his novels³⁰ and memorialized in his *Harper's* essay, the Twin Towers function as an index of the changes sweeping the city; its transformation from industrial metropolis to the media and financial cosmopolis of today. From *Players* (1977) to "In the ruins of the

²⁹ Save for the protagonist's reminiscences of his father, a New York subway inspector who took his son into the tunnels, introducing him to the idea that "existence tends to be nourished from below" (4).

³⁰ The towers are the object of a throwaway line in *Amazons* (written pseudonymously as Cleo Birdwell) and the object of varying degrees of commentary in *Players*, *Mao II*, *Underworld*, and *Cosmopolis*.

future” (2001), the repeated evocation of the World Trade Center presents the towers as the iconic image of the abstraction of New York.

The Storm of Progress

“There’s real estate and unreal estate,” muses a character from *Great Jones Street*, DeLillo’s 1973 novel about Bucky Wunderlick, a rock star recluse who holes up in a New York tenement to escape fame (145). Published concurrently with the erection of the World Trade Center (which is never explicitly referred to in the text), *Great Jones Street* captures New York, “that contaminated shrine,” at a pivotal moment in its urban redevelopment (2). The novel is filled with the clatter of construction (28, 44, 168, 245, 263) but even moreso it is awash in references to the homeless, the human cost of an increasingly tattered social safety net and disappearing livelihoods (13, 18, 66, 69, 76-77, 80, 82, 131, 158-159, 211-12, 215, 219, 258-65). Jarred loose by structural adjustment in the economy—namely, a profound realignment from manufacturing to services that gutted New York before surging over the rest of the country—the final relics of the nineteenth century industrial centre, its remnants and occupants, crumble and cower in the shadow of the looming twenty-first century. “The industrial loft buildings along Great Jones Street seemed misproportioned, broad structures half as tall as they should have been, as if deprived of light by the great skyscraper ranges to the north and south” (6). Left unsheltered from the storm of progress, the neighbourhood in question (part of Manhattan’s Lower East Side and only steps from the infamous Bowery, New York’s Skid

Row) somehow manages to weather the crisis. In a rather prescient passage, DeLillo hints at the gentrification to come.

Slowly along Great Jones, signs of commerce became apparent, of shipping and receiving, export packaging, custom tanning. This was an old street. Its materials were in fact its essence and this explains the ugliness of every inch. But it wasn't a final squalor. Some streets in their decline possess a kind of redemptive tenor, the suggestion of new forms about to evolve, and Great Jones was one of these, hovering on the edge of self-revelation. (18)

As it turns out, Bucky is in a position to witness, if not participate in, the renaissance of Great Jones Street. "In abundant sunlight a man carried paintings from a battered panel truck into the loft building across the street from me. He took canvas after canvas, about a dozen, gray every one with a white line drawn down the middle" (239). It's a fleeting moment in the novel, and one that is all too easy to miss given that most of the descriptions of street-level activity have to do with the indigent population and the extremities of their need and madness, but here we see the proverbial first artist staking a claim, transforming the terra incognita of urban decay into the artworld's next frontier.³¹

In a particularly searching and melancholy passage, Bucky imagines New York in future ruins, a hushed site for introspection and discovery by our descendants, "men versed in the methods of counter-archaeology. They will study us not by digging into the earth but by climbing vast dunes of industrial rubble and mutilated steel, seeking to reach the tops of our buildings" (209). Anticipating Maurice Wu's archaeological dig in DeLillo's following novel, *Ratner's Star* (1976), Bucky's post-apocalyptic fantasy turns on the theme of inversion, though in this case the reversal is spatial, in keeping with the

³¹ This detail also attests to the coming primacy of visual art in Manhattan's postindustrial economy. While Bucky (a musician and lyricist) and his upstairs neighbour Eddie Fenig (a writer) are artist figures, neither are part of the resurgent economy as the word is replaced by the image.

novel's contrast of street-level experience with an alienating verticality of seemingly inhuman forces of development. In contrast, inversion in *Ratner's Star* is temporal as the aforementioned Wu discovers that after a certain point, "the deeper we went the greater the complexity of the tool types, of the culture in general... Man more advanced the deeper we dig" (360). He models his discovery on the twilligon, an invented mathematical figure shaped like a boomerang and suggestive of history turned back upon itself, "cycles of progress and regress, ascent and descent" (LeClair 127). Grasping for a theory that explains his most curious discovery—that the human fossil record ranges backward from present sophistication to primitive simplicity and, unaccountably, regressing even further backwards to an even more ancient *complex* civilization resembling our own—Wu offers "the possibility that our original evolutionary thrust was followed by a period of degeneration that might have been connected to radiation diseases and such. Then, at a crude toolmaking level, things swung upward once again, taking us to the point we now occupy" (404).

Wu's excavations are part of the Logicon Project, a gathering of the world's most brilliant minds (including the novel's protagonist, fourteen year-old Billy Twillig) to decipher a cryptic transmission emanating from the celestial body of the title. Eventually they discover that the message was sent from earth in the distant past, from "a species of life that resembled modern man both outwardly and otherwise" (403). This species, of course, not only resembles us—it *is* us. "We get back only what we ourselves give," concludes one of the participants (405). For the reader, the novel occupies a paradoxical and indeterminate temporality in that it takes place in the near future and distant future

simultaneously. “Though set in 1979, *Ratner’s Star*... presents a future metamorphosis of the Age of Information,” explains Tom LeClair (135). On one hand we are encouraged to relate to the characters of *Ratner’s Star* as if they were contemporary to us. On the other hand, this identification is unsettled by Wu’s “novel evolutionary sequence” since the human fragments he unearths (including a jaw with bridgework) uncannily resemble us, too (409).

The crucial part of Wu’s supposition, however, is his explanation for the curious arc in the fossil record, the point at which the expected regression from present complexity to past simplicity is itself reversed, with complexity increasing the further the fossil record recedes. Theorizing that “radiation diseases” might account for this strange loop, Wu effectively sites *Ratner’s Star* on both the near and far side of a nuclear apocalypse. DeLillo enacts this logical contradiction to make a point about the inevitable outcome of theoretical abstraction: terminal self-negation. Though it never appears as such within the novel, nuclear war is responsible for its perspectival confusion. The reader, in other words, is both doubled and divided; we are both sender and (along with the characters) receiver of the signal the Logicon Project is tasked with decoding. *Ratner’s Star* is structured along the lines of what Slavoj Žižek calls a parallax gap, in that it stages “the confrontation of two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible” (*Parallax View*, 4). Whether we identify with the characters of *Ratner’s Star* or the bones they discover, neither perspective is reconcilable with the

other nor can the novel's timelines be synchronized.³² In the discomfort of occupying the parallax gap, DeLillo provides the occasion for the reader of *Ratner's Star* to become the kind of counter-archaeologist envisioned by *Great Jones Street's* Bucky Wunderlick.

Back in their universities in the earth, the counter-archaeologists will sort their reasons for our demise, citing as prominent the fact that we stored our beauty in the air, for birds of prey to see, while placing at eye level nothing more edifying than hardware, machinery and the implements of torture. (209)

Abstract thought separates us from nature and allows us to exert dominion over it. It is both the preeminent expression of human agency and its potential negation. Technology, suggests DeLillo in an interview, “has an enormous will to realize in three dimensions whatever becomes theoretically possible” (Barron). As the materialization of instrumental thinking, technology generates a momentum apparently independent of (and indifferent to) human direction, threatening to become its own end. Both *Ratner's Star* and *Great Jones Street* explore the realization of the technological imperative, whether in terms of its ultimate apogee—nuclear war—or, to return to the matter at hand, the stark verticality reshaping New York's skyline. “I stood across the street from the building on Great Jones, realizing I'd never before considered it as a total unit, having limited myself, in the visual idiom of the area, to the lower parts of small tenements, the middle and upper parts of the cast-iron titans,” marvels Bucky. “There wasn't much to see, no tilted skylight or skinny minaret [...] Beauty enough for the upward diggers” (213).

³² Tom LeClair, for example, discusses one of the ways that DeLillo has the novel circle back upon itself: Near its end a character excavates an ancient curved mirror, which prepares for the looped knot and a logic-bending fact of the book's action: Billy Twillig cuts his thumb near the end of [the section entitled] ‘Reflections,’ which is temporally after ‘Adventures,’ but he wears a bandage at the beginning of ‘Adventures.’ (116)

Space or Place: Unsettled Ground

Erected in 1973 on sixteen acres owned by the Port Authority, the World Trade Center emblemized the close co-operation of public and private interests implicated in the reshaping of New York.³³ The construction of the towers spelled doom for Manhattan's port, part of which was backfilled with material from the building site and developed as pricey real estate. The towers, Fitch explains, "were the wedge which led to the creation of Battery Park City and the physical elimination of the docks" (140). Fitch sees the assault on the docklands and resulting deindustrialization (without easy accessibility to the port, many local manufacturers were forced to relocate or shut down) as an exemplary instance of creative destruction, clearing the decks for the postmodern economy to come. Once completed, the towers in their looming symmetry attested to the substantial effects of the immaterial information revolution, to the physical impact of the binary code of ones and zeroes on the Manhattan skyline. "Shaped in the pure computer image of banking and finance (ac)countable and digital, they were in a sense [the brains of the world system that their architecture embodies]," notes Jean Baudrillard (*Spirit of Terrorism* 41). The towers also perfectly captured the geopolitical stakes of the nuclear age, the binary antagonism of evenly matched powers. "The WTC architecture has the effect of both materializing and naturalizing the particular realities of the Cold War period," explains Phillip Wegner ("Periodizing the Cold War" 58).³⁴ The twin towers

³³ "The World Trade Center and Battery Park City projects, both logical outgrowths of the 1958 Lower Manhattan plan, were being driven by the least accountable institutions in the post-Communist world—the government 'authority'," Fitch writes. "The modern authority answers to neither voters nor stockholders; it is accountable only to God and the bond market. (Not necessarily in that order.)" (151).

³⁴ For a thoughtful, if brief, discussion of the representation of the World Trade Center in DeLillo's fiction, see Wegner's "Periodizing the Cold War" (especially 56-58).

embody the tension between the real world and theoretical environments that informs so much of DeLillo's work. As one of DeLillo's characters notes, they are physically imposing, vertically vast, and yet somehow impermanent: "They remained concepts, no less transient for all their bulk than some routine distortion of light (*Players* 19).

The World Trade Center makes its first appearance in DeLillo's *oeuvre* in 1977's *Players*, a novel of marital disconnect, urban anomie and terror. The players of the title are Lyle and Pammy Wynant, spouses seemingly indifferent to one another, their friends, and their environment. Even their surname sounds like a query accompanied by a shrug: why not? Lyle is a Wall Street trader who "passed the time watching television" (19). Reluctant to commit to "standard programming," Lyle listlessly channel surfs between commercials, station breaks, Spanish-language dramas and public-access pornography. When a colleague named George Sedbauer is murdered on the floor of the stock exchange by a mysterious group of terrorists, Lyle finds himself drawn into their orbit. "The secret dream of the white collar," he tells one of the conspirators, "is the suggestion of a double life" (100). Deciding to take part in their plot, to become a "second George," Lyle simultaneously informs on them to an equally shadowy government agent (109). His compulsive betrayals are less a matter of playing both ends against some inapparent middle than they are indicative of an underlying pathology. Lyle, DeLillo writes, is "enmeshed in a psychology of stealth" (192). Pammy, meanwhile, is caught up in an intrigue of her own as she comes between Ethan and Jack, a couple whose relationship she compromises by sleeping with the unstable Jack. Her intrusion brings something to the surface that cannot withstand the scrutiny. "It occurred to her that this was the secret

life of their involvement. It had always been there, needing only this period of their extended proximity to reveal itself. Disloyalty, spitefulness, petulance” (177). Secure in her detachment, she is unable to see her affair with Jack in terms other than the pallid eroticism of “game-playing moods,” as DeLillo describes foreplay between the two (166). When Jack commits suicide in a grotesque act of self-immolation—a recurring image in DeLillo’s fiction, including *Cosmopolis* (100)—Pammy is utterly oblivious to the consequences of her actions. It is only upon returning home and watching a saccharine old movie (“a TV screen filled with serial grief”) that she finally weeps. Whether it is a delayed response to Jack’s death or the maudlin film is left indeterminate. What is certain is that even the most private moments and intimate feelings must be mediated through others in order to be authenticated, regardless of whether those others appear on a screen or as players in the (same) game.³⁵

In *Players* the deracination of grief is matched (and perhaps accomplished) by its routinization. Ironically, grief is Pammy’s profession. She works eighty-three floors up in the North Tower of the World Trade Center at the Grief Management Council, “a large and growing personal services organization whose clinics, printed material and trained counselors served the community in its efforts to understand and assimilate grief” (18). Curiously, the reasons for such widespread mental suffering go unmentioned; a diffuse and seemingly unmotivated sense of anxiety pervades the atmosphere. In no small part, this seems a human-scale response to the vaulting ambition of Minoru Yamasaki and the brutalist architecture of the towers themselves. They are not so much the pinnacle of

³⁵ “Lately [Pammy had] found that the nutritive material for their sex life was often provided by others, whoever happened to be present at a party or other gathering” (70).

human achievement as the grounds for its diminishment. The human spirit lies prostrate in the face of technological mastery and scientific management.

It was [Pammy's] original view that the World Trade Center was an unlikely headquarters for an outfit such as this. But she changed her mind as time passed. *Where else would you stack all this grief?* Somebody anticipated that people would one day crave the means to codify their emotions. A clerical structure would be needed. Teams of behaviorists assembled in the sewers and conceived a brand of futurism based on filing procedures. *To Pammy the towers didn't seem permanent. They remained concepts, no less transient for all their bulk than some routine distortion of light.* Making things seem even more fleeting was the fact that office space at Grief Management was constantly being reapportioned. Workmen sealed off some areas with partitions, opened up others, moved out file cabinets, wheeled in chairs and desks. It was as though they'd been directed to adjust the amount of furniture to levels of national grief. (18-19, italics mine)

Working in the towers proves a disorienting experience. The endlessly changing configuration of the GMC floorplan, for example, is an interesting display of flexibility that Harvey would appreciate. It also attests to the uncertain distinction between public and private experience that haunts the players. The epidemic of grief that sweeps through *Players* seems motivated by the mourning of stable and bounded self, either dead or steadily diminishing. Lyle, for example, frets that his inner life is starkly exposed, that "everyone knew his thoughts" (22). The involuntary transparency of his intent is mirrored by Pammy's inability to communicate. In a notably disjointed conversation with her co-worker Ethan, Pammy tells him "I walked in the wrong tower" and he replies, "Jack wants to live in Maine" (20). Talking at cross-purposes in an elliptical style, Pammy and Ethan loop around each without ever quite connecting, reinforcing the isolating effect of their surroundings. Like the twin towers themselves, they reflect and refract one another without penetrating beyond the surface.

Unsettled by a workplace in a constant state of flux ('unreal estate' in Bucky's terms), Pammy further struggles to adjust to the size and symmetries of her overall environment. Walking into the wrong tower, she anticipates Fredric Jameson's experience in Los Angeles' Bonaventure Hotel, where, given "the absolute symmetry of the four towers, it is quite impossible to get your bearings in this lobby; recently, color coding and directional signals have been added in a pitiful and revealing, rather desperate, attempt to restore the coordinates of an older space" (*Postmodernism* 43-44).³⁶ In *Players*, this contrast between this "older," mappable space—or *place*—and the bewildering new built environment is captured in Pammy's distinction between elevators and lobbies.

Pammy thought of the elevators in the World Trade Center as 'places.' She asked herself, not without morbid scorn: 'When does this place get to the forty-fourth floor?' Or: 'Isn't it just a matter of time before this place gets stuck with me inside it?' Elevators were supposed to be enclosures. These were too big, really, to fit that description. These also had different doors for entering and leaving, certainly a distinguishing feature of places more than of elevators.

If the elevators were places, the lobbies were 'spaces.' She felt abstract terms were called for in the face of such tyrannic grandeur. Four times a day she was dwarfed, progressively midgeted, walking across that purplish-blue rug. Spaces. Indefinite locations. Positions regarded as occupied by some thing. (23-24)

The World Trade Center embodies a contradiction (places versus spaces) but in such a way that it is a contradiction beyond individual mediation. There is quite simply no possible vantage point from which the World Trade Center *makes sense*. It overwhelms

³⁶ Jameson further declares:

This latest mutation in space—postmodern hyperspace—has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world. It may now be suggested that this alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment [...] can itself stand as the symbol and analogue of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects. (*Postmodernism* 44)

rather than informs perception.³⁷ It is an object of contemplation that anchors one's experience of the surrounding city at the same time as it symbolizes the reorganization of urban space appropriate to the emerging post-industrial, financialized economy.

Lyle, half-jokingly, explains to some guests the purpose of their rooftop patio: "It's to give Pammy a look at the World Trade Center whenever she's depressed. That gets her going again" (81). It is alienating and comforting both, but above all, it *compels*. You can't really look away. This rapt fascination features in other DeLillo novels. For example, both Brita Nilsson (*Mao II*) and Klara Sax (*Underworld*) make a point of mentioning how the towers dominate the view from their apartment windows (165; 487).³⁸ In *Underworld*, which depicts the construction of the World Trade Center as the primal scene in the abstraction of New York, Klara Sax notes that, "She saw it almost everywhere she went" (372). In a conversation she strikes up with a similarly distracted stranger, they discuss its insistent presence.

"I think of it as one, not two," she said. "Even though there are clearly two towers. It's a single entity, isn't it?"

"Very terrible thing but you have to look at it I think."

"Yes, you have to look." (372)

While for Pammy and Lyle the World Trade Center is still shockingly new, its uncanny presence is gradually domesticated as we progress through DeLillo's novels of the 1980s

³⁷ "Pammy on the eighty-third floor of the north tower contrived to pass the time by devising a question for Ethan Segal. If the elevators in the World Trade Center were places, as she believed them to be, and if the lobbies were spaces, as she further believed, what then was the World Trade Center itself? Was it a condition, an occurrence, a physical event, an existing circumstance, a presence, a state, a set of invariables? Ethan didn't respond and she changed the subject..." (47-48).

³⁸ Uncannily, images of the towers are capable of commanding one's attention even on the far side of the world. Brita, for example, recalls a trip to Tokyo where she stumbled across a reproduction of a painting, "a paneled canvas showing the World Trade Center *at precisely the angle she saw it from her window* and in the same dark spirit. These were her towers, standing windowless, two black latex slabs that *consumed the available space*" (*Mao II* 165, italics mine).

and 1990s until, of course, the obscene smear left by the 2001 terrorist attack reactivates some of the initial apprehension and awe in the form of melancholy and nostalgia. That, however, is getting ahead of things.

Waves and Currents

In *Players*, the retroactive significance of the World Trade Center has yet to be established. The post-industrial, information economy it would come to symbolize is at this point an emergent as opposed to dominant phenomenon (to employ Raymond Williams' useful distinction). In fact, at this early juncture DeLillo opposes the soaring towers to the street—Wall Street. Pammy's job on the eighty-third floor of the North Tower is regularly contrasted to the financial district, where Lyle works "in a roar of money" (13).³⁹ The two, it must be said, are developing along parallel paths, but the moment of their convergence is not yet within sight. Compared to the baffling immensity of the towers ("They remained concepts, no less transient for all their bulk than some routine distortion of light") the Street itself is still a physical place, if not for long. The trading floor emanates a reassuring materiality—"This was solid work, clear and sometimes cheerful, old-world in a way, men gathered in a square to take part in verbal exchange, openly, recording figures with pencil stubs, the clerks having to puzzle over handwriting. Paper accumulated underfoot" (157)—but it is already tinged with a sepia

³⁹ The spouses betray similarly opposed mindsets: Pammy is near-clinically detached (particularly evident in her game-playing with Jack) while Lyle's is a clandestine mentality. These are pathological positions in line with their respective orientations. Pammy's separation is a matter of elevation, she is aloof *and* aloft. Lyle, meanwhile, gravitates toward the lateral realm of plots, where everything is connected, stretching across the border and over the horizon (the novel's denouement takes place in Brantford, Ontario). Compared to the studied neutrality of the World Trade Center, the street is pointedly masculine: "Down here, in the district, men still assembled solemnly to gape at the females" (13). Sexual difference remains an underexamined aspect of DeLillo's writing and fertile ground for further study.

nostalgia (“old-world”) as the reign of paper money faces imminent succession by the electronic kind. “Have you been declared officially antiquated or what? Are you viable, Lyle?” asks Ethan. “Will there be a floor to trade on in the near future?” (82).

Though couched in the boozy banter of cocktail hour, Ethan’s question is not nearly as flip as it sounds because the disappearance of the trading floor *is* imminent. At least, that’s what the conspirators believe, the ones who assassinate Lyle’s colleague and (without too much effort) recruit Lyle to their cause.

It’s this system that we believe is their secret power. It all goes floating across that floor. Currents of invisible life. This is the center of their existence. The electronic system. The waves and charges. The green numbers on the board. This is... their way of continuing on through rotting flesh, their closest taste of immortality. Not the bulk of all that money. The system itself, the current... It was this secret of theirs that we wanted to destroy, this invisible power. (107)

The terrorist network in *Players* takes aim at this unfolding abstraction by planning to blow up the Exchange. It is vulnerable only to threats to its rapidly disappearing material base, but the existence of such threats hastens this process of attenuation. “All this decentralization we see. It is a reaction to terror?” asks one of plotters. “I amuse myself by thinking they have a master plan to eliminate prominent targets. To go underground. Or totally electric. Nothing but waves and currents talking to each other. Spirits. So the thing should be hit to whatever extent, now” (109). Ironically, their protest against the steady encroachment of the spectral realm of finance itself takes the form of a symbolic gesture. Such an attack is capable of generating a spectacle, but not much more (“another

media event” as one plotter remarks to Lyle).⁴⁰ At best, they are destined to become victims of their own success, as their intervention will hasten the process of abstraction they so despise. At worst, their efforts will emphasize that the electronic network of capital is itself more or less immune to physical harm. It seems likely, though, that neither will come to pass because Lyle’s serial betrayals gives the authorities advance warning of their scheme.

Whatever the case, the urgency of their aim to strike at the financial district while there is still something tangible there to hit seems to have been justified by the course of events. For instance, the bond room—the location where one of their number is apprehended after shooting George Sedbauer on the floor of the exchange—is a place that by now has become entirely vestigial. Before the advent of electronic trading systems, physical bonds (actual engraved certificates) used to change hands among brokers at the end of the day in order to settle their clients’ accounts. In 1998, however, the New York Stock Exchange established the Automated Bond System (ABS) and trading became entirely screen-based, completing the transition to the immaterial exchange characteristic of the financial markets as a whole.⁴¹ The bond room is a useful example because it not only signifies the abstraction of physical place into notional space, it also hints at the

⁴⁰ This appears to be DeLillo’s gloss on the legacy of Sixties radicalism. The unnamed group of terrorists bear some resemblance to countercultural revolutionaries like the Weather Underground and the Baader-Meinhof gang (98). Their cache of supplies comes from an earlier era: “Riot shields, tear gas, all that anti-crowd business in the sixties,” one concludes. Even the explosives intended for Wall Street were “obviously hauled out of some National Guard armory in the middle of a night in spring” (103). While the idealism remains, it is a curiously stunted version incapable of recognizing the degree to which its tactics are not only implicated within but also enact the logic of abstraction they profess to abhor.

⁴¹ Electronic trading among major brokerage houses actually began in the late 1960s with the appearance of networks like Instinet but it took some time to standardize the trading that went on between institutions. The financial services industry of today, which caters to individual as well as institutional investors, was still some ways off (Taylor 201).

temporal complications alluded to above. As Nicholas Dunbar points out, compared to traders in currencies or stocks, bond traders think in “bond time” (55). Bonds are fixed-term financial instruments; unlike currencies or stocks, bonds *mature*, meaning that at some specified future date the issuer pays the principal back to the bondholder. Much of the activity in the bond markets consists of traders exchanging slightly aged bonds (say a five-year bond with four years left before maturity) for newer ones, pushing the horizon of the expectations ever outwards. “While ordinary time unfolds around us, bond time stretches out before the trader, never getting any closer” (Dunbar 54). Living in bond time, in other words, means quite simply to live in the future, to inhabit a purely conceptual environment. Perhaps this is what DeLillo has in mind when Lyle explains to Pammy: “The district, outwardly, is like the end of organized time” (71).

The World Trade Center symbolizes the role of urban development as physical places are transformed into virtual spaces. Simultaneously the most intimate demonstration of our ability to reshape the environs of everyday life, gentrification is also development at its most distant, producing a new and unfamiliar cityscape looming out of all scale to its inhabitants. Alienated by the new spatial dimensions, city dwellers are also discombobulated by the accelerating pace of development, the pace of which frustrates any attempt to adapt to the ever-changing coordinates. What DeLillo offers in his fiction is not a polemical “take” on this process, but canny observation of its effects. Neither a luddite nor a booster, DeLillo is fascinated with the seeming impersonal and abstract logic of development to, as he says of technology, realize in three dimensions whatever is theoretically possible. He is not blind to the human costs; eschewing any explicitly class-

based rhetoric about the process, he populates his gentrifying fictions of the 1970s with the people who couldn't keep up, the human tide that floods the streets even as the buildings tower ever higher.⁴² Meanwhile, as Fitch details in *The Assassination of New York*, Wall Street is at the forefront of these changes and the driving force behind the decomposition and recomposition of the city. Financialization takes the logic of abstraction to its farthest possible extent. "In the financial district, everything tend to edge beyond acceptability," DeLillo writes in *Players*. "It was a test environment for extreme states of mind" (27). With the transformation of money into information ("the current"), we have the first stirrings of a concept that emerges fully formed only in DeLillo's recent work: cyber-capital.

From Acropolis to Agora, or, Twin Towers Times Squared

What I've been calling the abstraction of New York reaches a fever pitch in *Cosmopolis*. Set at the very height of the New Economy bubble (on a day in April 2000, as the frontispiece portentously declares), *Cosmopolis* takes Eric from splendor to squalor in a matter of hours. Notably, the Twin Towers, previously the focus of DeLillo's New York fictions, are nowhere to be found. Their absence is plausible enough, particularly given the constricted scope of the narrative. The action, such as it is, takes place far from Wall Street; spanning barely a dozen blocks as Eric travels west on 47th Street through the Midtown banking district and, significantly, Times Square. Even as they recede into the background of the New Economy, though, the Twin Towers hover over this text, their absence palpable. The destruction of the World Trade Center occurred as DeLillo was

⁴² As Brita puts it: "Sick and dying people with nowhere to live and there are bigger and bigger towers all the time, fantastic buildings with miles of rentable space. *All the space is inside*" (*Mao II* 40, italics mine).

nearing completion of *Cosmopolis*, which was already taking shape as an elegy for the exuberance of the boom. “I’d been working on it for some time before I realized that the day on which this book takes place is the last day of its era,” DeLillo says (Barron). The razing of the towers provides emphatic if entirely unintended punctuation; in *Cosmopolis* they are “vestigial structures,” superceded by the glowing nimbus of Times Square, which moves to the fore as the privileged icon of cyber-capital and backdrop for the novel’s pivotal scene.

As a cosmopolitical justification, cyber-capital reaches its apogee at exactly the midpoint of *Cosmopolis*. Halfway through the narrative, the day, and Manhattan itself, Eric finds himself in Times Square where his exuberance reaches a fever pitch. Accompanied by his chief of theory, he steps out of the limo and gazes upwards at the digital clamour surrounding them.

He led her out of the car and onto the sidewalk, where they were able to get a partial view of the electronic display of market information, the moving message units that streaked across the face of an office tower on the other side of Broadway. Kinski was transfixed. This was very different from the relaxed news reports that wrapped around the old Times Tower a few blocks south of here. These were three tiers of data running concurrently and swiftly about a hundred feet above the street. Financial news, stock prices, currency markets. The action was unflagging. The hellbent sprint of numbers and symbols, the fractions, decimals, stylized dollar signs, the streaming release of words, of multinational news, all too fleet to be absorbed.... Never mind the speed that makes it hard to follow what passes before the eye. The speed is the point. Never mind the urgent and endless replenishment, the way data dissolves at one end of the series just as it takes shape at the other. This is the point, the thrust, the future. We are not witnessing the flow of information so much as pure spectacle, or information made sacred, ritually unreadable. The small monitors of the office, home and car become a kind of idolatry here, where crowds might gather in astonishment. (80)

It is no accident that DeLillo chose Times Square as the setting for the novel’s pivotal scene. While the World Trade Center ushered in the information age and stood as its most

prominent symbol, Mark Taylor suggests that Times Square is the epicenter of the New Economy (if not its ground zero). “The town square of New York has become the world square of the global economy” (190). Following upon the heels of the Port Authority’s redevelopment of Lower Manhattan, the gentrification of Times Square began in earnest during the 1980s with the physical rehabilitation of the west forties and continued into the 1990s with Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s efforts to roust social undesirables (i.e. the homeless and indigent, ‘squeegee’ people) whose presence served as an unwelcome reminder of the area’s past seediness. Tenants that moved into the historic theatre district transformed it into the heart of what Taylor calls the finance-entertainment complex that dominated the New Economy. By the end of the 1990s, Times Square was the agora of the information age, home to a variety of media companies (The New York Times, Reuters, ABC, MTV, Viacom) and financial organizations (Lehman Brothers, Morgan Stanley, Nasdaq). Rather than the looming gigantism that characterized the Twin Towers, Times Square instead took to spectacular display. Following the example of Las Vegas, signs increasingly took precedence over the buildings supporting them—to the point that a 1987 zoning bylaw *required* Times Square tenants to maintain extensive signage (Taylor 185). For example, the exterior of the Nasdaq Marketsite, a seven-storey cylindrical tower attached to the Condé Nast building, consists entirely of a wraparound electronic display, one that constantly streams information (stock quotes, financial news and advertising). Inside what amounts to a giant three-dimensional stock ticker, the first-floor television studio with its massive rear wall display provides the backdrop for financial reporters from various networks (CNBC, Bloomberg, BBC, etc.) to do stand-ups in front

of a kaleidoscope, a constant froth, of changing market conditions. It seems likely that this is the digital cathedral that so astonishes Eric and Vija.

In contrast to the “straight-edge enormity” of the World Trade Center, Times Square begs the question that Robert Venturi once asked himself driving down the Las Vegas strip: “Is the sign the building or the building the sign?” (74). For Paul Goldberger, an architecture critic writing in the *New Yorker*, “the new towers in Times Square show us, unambiguously, that the idea of the skyscraper as a pure object is dead. The new buildings have a fluid identity and it is tempting to think of their dematerialization as neatly paralleling the shift toward cyberspace—from mechanization to electronics to pixels” (op. cit. Taylor 187).⁴³ Insofar as any terrestrial place can, Times Square directly realizes the purely notional environment of cyber-capital. Caught up in the heady atmosphere, Eric’s confidence is at its peak, soaring past the raucous noise of a street protest. It is here that he makes his fateful bet on the yen and overreaches, thus plunging the markets into chaos. “Icarus falling. You did it yourself. Meltdown in the sun,” he is later told (202).

Cyber-capital represents the terminus of Harvey’s time-space compression.⁴⁴ As the circulation of capital speeds up, it increasingly abolishes distance as a constraint on its reproduction, resulting in a uniform spatiality where we are all equidistant to one another (this is the promise of globalization). It generates a purely notional space, an artificial environment exemplified by the omnipresent yet insubstantial financial markets, which

⁴³ Goldberger’s conclusion is echoed by Eric Packer, who makes a note to himself “about the anachronistic quality of the word skyscraper” (9).

⁴⁴ “I use the word ‘compression’ because a strong case can be made that the history of capitalism has been characterized by speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world sometimes seems to collapse inwards upon us,” explains Harvey (*Condition* 240).

are everywhere and nowhere, all at once, all the time. Temporally speaking, cyber-capital accelerates to the point where its circulation is more or less instantaneous. “The present is harder to find,” says Kinski “It is being sucked out of the world to make way for the future of uncontrolled markets and huge investment potential” (79). Eric, though, wants to go *faster*. The secret of his success is that his system is so microtimed that no one can keep up with it (191). As a disgruntled former worker describes him, Eric “wanted to be one civilization ahead of this one” (152). After a fashion, he succeeds.

Through the speculation in *futures*, cyber-capital renders the unpredictable *quality* of the future (i.e. its ‘volatility’) into a predictable *quantity*, one whose risks can be inferred, calculated, and ultimately hedged out. “Computer power eliminates doubt. All doubt rises from past experience. But the past is disappearing,” Eric’s chief of theory tells him, “it’s cyber-capital that creates the future” (86, 79). In *Cosmopolis*, what DeLillo calls ‘the future’ designates the indeterminate state produced through what David Harvey calls the discounting of time-future into time-present (161).⁴⁵ It resembles nothing so much as an endless present since it is predicated on the persistence of sameness. As a result, Eric realizes, “there’s no more danger in the new” (8). Eric aspires to this fully rationalized state. Indeed, in a partial and yet very suggestive way, there are moments in *Cosmopolis* when he directly inhabits it. One of the oddities of the narrative is Eric’s spycam, the closed circuit video system in his limo that he uses for teleconferencing. It routinely shows things that haven’t quite happened to him yet (22, 52, 93-95, 204-07).

⁴⁵ Consider the following exchange between Eric and an underling:

“[The] Bank of Japan left interest rates unchanged.”

“This happened today?”

“This happened *tonight*. In Tokyo. I called a source at the Nikkei.” (40, italics mine)

His own image caught his eye, live on the oval screen beneath the spycam. Some seconds passed. He saw himself recoil in shock. More time passed. He felt suspended, waiting. Then there was a detonation, loud and deep, near enough to consume all the information around him. He recoiled in shock. (93)

Kinski, as always, is philosophical about this seeming impossibility. “Genius alters the terms of its habitat,” she says. “There are rare minds operating, a few, here and there, the polymath, the true futurist. A consciousness such as yours, hypermaniacal, may have contact points beyond the general perception” (95). The ‘future’ generated by cyber-capital is really nothing more than an elaborate fantasy of total control, albeit one reinforced by its increasing materialization.

As the novel opens, Eric finds himself on the verge of a breakthrough. His formidable intellect and ruthlessly competitive drive have brought him great wealth and prestige. What he is after, though, is something more: *transcendence*. Eric’s goal, *pace* Randy Martin, is not simply to live *through* the market, but to live *in it*. His speculation has become increasingly *speculative* as he is looking, not for the next trade, but the next step: “an evolutionary advance that needed only the practical mapping of the nervous system onto digital memory. It would be the master thrust of cyber-capital, to extend the human experience toward infinity as a medium for corporate growth and investment, for the accumulation of profits and vigorous reinvestment” (207). For Eric, the market has become a form of metaphysics, a condition to which he himself aspires.

It was shallow thinking to maintain that numbers and charts were the cold compression of unruly human energies, every sort of yearning and midnight sweat reduced to lucid units in the financial markets. In fact data itself was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process. This was the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the biosphere. Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole. (24)

Cyber-capital, the medium of his ceaseless ambition, generates theoretical models so highly refined they no longer simply represent reality, they have in effect replaced it. Eric's audacious gamble is that having brought into being an autonomous realm (epitomized by financial markets and cyberspace), cyber-capital is poised to encompass the totality of existence, subjecting even the biosphere to the "digital imperative."

There is, however, something holding him back. "Perhaps the most important thing at the outset of the book," explains DeLillo, "is that he is feeling a certain intimation of mortality" (Barron). In this case, the hand of fate is clad in latex and inserted in Eric's rectum, "probing for some murky fact" (48). During one of his daily (!) physicals, Eric learns he has an asymmetrical prostate, a fact that causes him unreasoning anxiety (8, 52-54). The doctor's pronouncement, however, is offered less in the spirit of sober diagnosis than as a casual observation, an airy aside, since this particular abnormality is a fairly common condition; in short, nothing to worry about. It is a meaningless peculiarity of Eric's biology and yet it nonetheless fills him with dread.

There was something about the idea of asymmetry. It was intriguing in the world outside the body, a counterforce to balance and calm, the riddling little twist, subatomic, that made creation happen. But when he removed the word from its cosmological register and applied it to the body of a male mammal, his body, he began to feel pale and spooked. He felt a certain perverse reverence toward the word. A fear of, a distance from. When he heard the word spoken in a context of urine and semen and when he thought of the word in the shadow of pissed pants, one, and limp-dick desolation, two, he was haunted to the point of superstitious silence. (52-53)

Why is his asymmetrical prostate a source of such anxiety? Eric is not so much a hypochondriac as he is guilty of conflating two distinct registers: cosmology and biology. In terms of "the world outside the body" asymmetry exists only to be rationalized,

“balanced and calmed” through the rigorous application of his sophisticated models. In his exquisitely ordered and, as one character remarks, “sadistically precise” world (200), there are no meaningless peculiarities because the very act of identifying them brings them under the sway of a relentlessly categorizing intelligence that homogenizes difference.⁴⁶ As such, Eric is an Adamic figure who brings order to the world through naming.⁴⁷ His prostate, however, cannot be rationalized. Its asymmetry remains a nagging fact, an unwelcome reminder that not everything can be subsumed under the logic of abstraction, that the equation never quite balances. For Eric, who aspires to a purely cosmological existence,⁴⁸ biology represents the final barrier keeping him from realizing in personal terms the transcendent possibilities of cyber-capital. The body, in other words, is “the structure he wanted to dismiss in theory even when he was shaping it under the measured effect of barbells and weights. He wanted to judge it redundant and transferable... convertible to wave arrays of information” (48).

Faced with the recalcitrance of the corporeal, an element of doubt has crept into Eric’s otherwise overweening confidence in the transformative potential of cyber-capital (31). He is uneasily aware of the friction exerted by the flesh, impeding his otherwise steady ascent to the ethereal dimension of capital flows and the unending circulation of information. Seeking to overcome this last bastion of stubborn resistance to the “digital imperative” and regain his formerly unassailable—and inhuman—certainty, Eric makes a

⁴⁶ For a related concept, see my discussion of arbitrage below.

⁴⁷ Naming as a specific form of Eric’s mastery is an intriguing topic but one beyond the scope of my discussion. For relevant passages in the novel, see 25-32, 196.

⁴⁸ One detail in particular is rather telling of Eric’s cosmological obsession. His limo features a “ceiling mural, a dark ink wash, semi-abstract, that showed the arrangement of the planets at the time of his birth, calculated to the hour, minute and second” (179).

spectacular wager, a gamble on his ability to trace the shared surface of market and nature. “He knew there was something no one had detected, a pattern latent in nature itself, a leap of pictorial language that went beyond the standard models of technical analysis and out-predicted even the arcane charting of his own followers in the field,” DeLillo writes. “There had to be a way to explain the yen” (63). Charting the yen takes on a talismanic significance for Eric, who pursues it with the avidity of a man in search of immortality. The unspoken assumption here is that by correctly figuring the yen, Eric’s unwavering belief in the fundamental shared identity between the market and nature will be validated. This, in turn, confirms the explanatory power of cyber-capital as a cosmopolitical justification, leaving the actual disposition of his body as postscript to this intuitive leap. “People will not die. Isn’t this the creed of the new culture? People will be absorbed into streams of information,” Vija Kinski, Eric’s chief of theory, marvels. “Why die when you can live on a disk? A disk, not a tomb. An idea beyond the body. A mind that’s everything you ever were and will be, but never weary or confused or impaired. It’s a mystery to me, how such a thing might happen” (104-05).

Precisely at this moment Times Square is besieged by anti-globalization activists. The most cogent analysis of their complaint comes from Vija Kinski, Eric’s chief of theory. “The more visionary the idea, the more people it leaves behind. This is what the protest is all about. Visions of technology and wealth. The force of cyber-capital that will send people into the gutter to retch and die,” she warns Eric, as his limo slides through the demonstration. “This is a protest against the future. They want to hold off the future. They want to normalize it, keep it from overwhelming the present” (91). The problem, as

Kinski sees it, is that the protesters fail to realize that the present is already past and the future is here. The only thing accomplished by their street theatre and sloganeering is the erection of a barricade that the market itself requires; one more obstacle to be surmounted in the continual process of overcoming that characterizes the logic of capitalist development. “The market culture is total. It breeds these men and women. They are necessary to the system they despise. They give it energy and definition. They are market-driven. They are traded on the markets of the world. That is why they exist, to invigorate and perpetuate the system” (90).

Outside the limo, angry demonstrators rock the vehicle, deluging it with projectiles and piss. An investment bank is bombed. Electronic displays that used to display stock quotes are hacked and reprogrammed. On one: “A SPECTER IS HAUNTING THE WORLD—THE SPECTER OF CAPITALISM.” On another: “A RAT BECAME A UNIT OF CURRENCY” (94, 96). Inside the limo, Eric notes without comment that in their citation of the *Communist Manifesto* in the first message, the protesters replaced communism, circa 1850, with capitalism, circa 2000. He also recognizes the second ticker consists of a line from a familiar poem. “It was exhilarating, his head in the fumes, to see the struggle and ruin around him, the gassed men and women in their defiance, waving looted Nasdaq T-shirts, and to realize they’d been reading the same poetry he’d been reading” (97). Eric looks out at his antagonists and sees only a shared identity.⁴⁹ Marked by vandalism and violence, the demonstration re-emphasizes “the idea that we all live under... Destruction” (92). His identification with

⁴⁹ In contrast to Kinski, who dryly notes: “This is controlled anger, I would say. But what would happen if they knew that the head of Packer Capital was in the car?” (92).

the demonstrators is predicated on the idea that their revolt is a “market fantasy.” If their actions can ultimately be recuperated and domesticated, the protest itself is nothing more than a spontaneous upwelling of the chaotic energy that electrifies the capitalist dynamic. Far from feeling threatened by the mob scene, Eric enjoys the spectacle of rage. The very ferocity of the protest unwittingly attests to the power of the market. “The protest was a form of systemic hygiene, purging and lubricating. It attested again, for the ten thousandth time, to the market culture’s innovative brilliance, its ability to shape itself to its own flexible ends, absorbing everything around it” (99). Inspired by their example of destruction⁵⁰ and gripped by a revolutionary fervour, Eric plunges into the market. At the height of his confidence, he piles into the yen trade, staking his remaining fortune on its outcome.

Almost immediately, though, he is brought up short. Eric’s pleasure turns to dread as he is faced with an outlier, an act that cannot be recuperated by the market, a deed that takes place outside of it, “a man sat on the sidewalk with legs crossed, trembling in a length of braided flame” (97). More so than anarchist bomb throwing or street theatre, the self-immolation of the protester points to a beyond that Eric never believed existed. His confidence is profoundly shaken, because the market “could not claim this man or assimilate his act. Not such starkness and horror. This was a thing outside its reach” (100). At this very moment, Eric’s intelligence “complex” informs his security chief Torval about the existence of a credible threat, “status urgent” (102). This scene functions as *Cosmopolis*’s dramatic hinge as Eric plummets from the heights of triumph

⁵⁰ “The urge to destroy is a creative urge,” he tells Kinski. “This is also the hallmark of capitalist thought. Enforced destruction. Old industries have to be harshly eliminated. New markets have to be forcibly claimed. Old markets have to be re-exploited. Destroy the past, make the future,” she responds (92-93).

to the depths of despair. The spectacle of protest (or rather, protest-as-spectacle) serves as confirmation of his faith in the totalizing nature of the market, capable of incorporating even the most passionate expressions of dissent. The burning man, however, brings him sharply back to earth as he is forced to acknowledge that there is something about the corporeal dimension of experience, the mute fact of the body and the stink of burning flesh, that cannot be reduced to zeroes and ones; that something remains outside of the market.

HOMO NOVO ECONOMICUS

Something of a New Economy chimera, Eric Packer is a composite figure with a biography cobbled together from a number of prominent bull market mavens. Eric, DeLillo tells us, started out as a stock tout, a booster in the tradition of Henry Blodgett and George Gilder, men whose pronouncements drove markets.⁵¹ His turn as a celebrity

⁵¹ Working as an analyst for CIBC Oppenheimer, Blodgett famously predicted in 1998 that Amazon.com, a bellwether New Economy stock, would hit share prices of \$400. When it hit the mark in three weeks without having reported any earnings, he was feted as a visionary. As Roger Lowenstein sardonically notes, “the lack of profits was a boon. It freed investors to speculate without the deadweight anchor of numbers; it allowed native optimism to ripen into something larger and dreamier” (*Origins of the Crash* 103). Blodgett’s turn as a celebrity analyst ended badly. He was eventually exiled from Wall Street as one of the more public examples made of analysts offering corrupt recommendations to investors. The problem was widespread. The Glass-Steagall Act that separated investment banks and commercial banks had slowly eroded during the 1980s and was completely gutted by 1997. Without it, the potential for conflicts of interest was huge. “Analysts, who were supposed to provide reliable information for investors, were actually promoting companies on behalf of the investment banking branches of their firms, and journalists, who were supposed to be objective, were allowed to own stock in the companies they covered” (Taylor 209).

Gilder, author of techno-utopian screeds like *Microcosm* and *Telecosm*, played a crucial role in the explosion of technology stocks in the mid-1990s. His monthly *Gilder Technology Report* celebrated companies that exemplified the new paradigm of the “information revolution.” More importantly, it functioned as a stock-picking bible for a rapidly growing subscriber base (around 65,000 at the height of the New Economy). Companies that found themselves in its pages enjoyed an immediate surge in stock prices, the so-called Gilder effect. Paradoxically, though, “the Gilder effect has begun to erode Gilder’s reputation as a prophet. Now that many thousands of people buy whatever stock that he recommends, his judgments have become self-fulfilling. He no longer predicts markets; he steers them” (MacFarquhar, 112-13). Gilder came crashing down to earth in 2002 when his self-declared “favourite” stock, Global Crossing, went belly-up in the fourth-biggest bankruptcy in American history (Henwood *After the New Economy* 197).

analyst, though, is only the beginning, a doorway into the financial markets that he would come to dominate. Eschewing the productive economy represented by companies and the stocks used to value them, Eric sets his sights on the economic empyrean: the frictionless flows of finance capital epitomized by currency trading.

He thought of the people who used to visit his website back in the days when he was forecasting stocks, when forecasting was pure power, and he'd tout a technology stock or bless an entire sector and automatically cause doublings in share price and the shifting of worldviews, when he was effectively making history, before history became monotonous and slobbering, yielding to his search for something purer, for techniques of charting that predicted the movements of money itself. He traded in currencies from every sort of territorial entity, modern democratic nations and dusty sultanates, paranoid people's republics, hellhole rebel states run by stoned boys.

He found beauty and precision here, hidden rhythms in the fluctuations of a given currency. (75-76)

Eric is motivated by a desire to slip terrestrial constraints: of corporeality, of the "real" economy. He is, as his own analyst suggests, "speculating into the void" (21). The increasingly reflexive character of Eric's speculation parallels the dematerialization of the economy as a whole. This process has been ongoing since the 1970s as the manufacturing industry either rusted out or began to flee to more hospitable locales (i.e. "outsourced" to low or no-tax zones with minimal labour costs) and finance took over as the main driver of the economy. Eric completes the intellectual trajectory of the New Economy in his latest incarnation as a private fund manager (Packer Capital), which also provides *Cosmopolis* with its most significant real-world analogue: the 1998 collapse of hedge fund giant Long Term Capital Management.

Long-Term, a fund with only a hundred investors, precipitated the worst financial meltdown on Wall Street in more than a half-century, one that imperiled global financial

markets.⁵² The crisis resulted from LTCM's enormous exposure, a series of risky investments that were themselves leveraged to the point that LTCM was known in the financial world as the "central bank of volatility" (Dunbar 178). "This one obscure arbitrage fund had amassed an amazing \$100 billion in assets, virtually all of it borrowed," explains Roger Lowenstein.

As monstrous as this indebtedness was, it was by no means the worst of Long-Term's problems. The fund had entered into thousands of derivative contracts, which had endlessly intertwined it with every bank on Wall Street. These contracts, essentially side bets on market prices, covered an astronomical sum—more than \$1 trillion worth of exposure. (xix)

Panicked at the thought of cascading failures, the Federal Reserve stepped in and arranged for a bailout financed by Wall Street's leading banks, all of which were implicated to some degree in the fiasco. Over \$3.5 billion was raised to keep the fund solvent, a rescue package that left many aghast given the moral hazard quandary involved (rewarding risky behaviour can lead to more and deeper crises in the future). But Long-Term was quite simply "too big to fail."⁵³ At the time the bailout raised little outcry beyond the business papers. This is perhaps the most curious element of the whole affair. "Stepping back from Wall Street, [one] would have noticed that America's economy was still quite vibrant (unlike in the fall of 1929, when, by the time of the Great Crash on Wall Street, it was already in recession)" Lowenstein asserts (195). The crisis was confined to

⁵² Fall-out spread quickly throughout the interconnected global markets. To give just one example of the repercussions of LTCM's failure, at the time of the crisis "the assets held by the UK's top 50 pension funds fell to 40% below the level needed to match their liabilities" (Dunbar x)

⁵³ Arguably, this inflated a moral hazard "bubble" that finally popped in April 2000. In other words, by bailing out one of its own Wall Street deferred rather than defused the crisis. When it finally did come, it was much more severe and widespread than what would have happened if Long-Term had been allowed to fail on its own.

the financial markets.⁵⁴ In fact, most Americans were blithely unaware that it even existed.

The LTCM debacle provides a valuable counterpoint to *Cosmopolis* because it is above all a story about the rise and fall of the New Economy and the ideology of cyber-capital that girded it. While I am not suggesting anything so crude as that DeLillo has written a thinly fictionalized version of the following events, I think a detailed explication of the philosophy guiding Long-Term's approach is crucial to grasping the mindset that DeLillo critiques in *Cosmopolis*. Understanding the grounds for the widespread and fervent belief in the transcendent possibilities of 'fictitious capital', which is to say, capitalist realism, will greatly enrich our understanding of DeLillo's fiction *about* it. In what follows, I provide a detailed account of Long-Term's significance, not only in terms of its epic collapse but also its origins in the financial revolution that took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s, building on my discussion of the "abstraction" of New York. Even though one of the most commented-upon effects of cyber-capital is the challenge it poses to a sense of *historicity*, it is important to realize that it has a *history*. As such, the material below is as much an exposition as it is an analysis. I do not presume the reader's familiarity with either the LTCM saga or with the recent evolution of financial markets, so of necessity some of the following passages are reportorial in nature.

The role played by hedge funds like LTCM (and the fictional Packer Capital) in the 'New Economy' of the 1990s is perhaps the most underreported and least understood aspect of the boom years. As private and largely unregulated pools of capital for wealthy investors, hedge funds are by nature secretive. They are limited in size and unlike their

⁵⁴ "It was as if a country had collapsed, but no-one could see which one." (Dunbar xiv)

more commonplace cousins, mutual funds, they do not have to register with the Securities and Exchange Commission.⁵⁵ This provides them with a great deal of latitude: hedge funds can borrow as much as their lenders are willing to supply and can concentrate their portfolio to a degree unimaginable in the mutual fund industry where diversification is the watchword. In fact, the government is content to leave hedge funds mostly to their own devices. “The implicit logic,” explains Roger Lowenstein, “is that if a fund is open to only a small group of millionaires and institutions, agencies such as the SEC need not trouble to monitor it. Presumably, millionaires know what they are doing; if not, their losses are nobody’s business but their own” (24). Though they have been around in one form or another since the 1920s, hedge funds only entered the public consciousness in the 1990s through the actions of fund managers like George Soros, who famously “broke” the Bank of England by shorting the pound in 1992.⁵⁶ They have since entered the popular lexicon of “The New Gilded Age” as the ultimate in boutique investing. Among the parvenus of the New Economy, Lowenstein argues, “hedge funds became a symbol of the richest *and* the best” (26). And LTCM was undisputedly the best of the best.

⁵⁵ Hedge funds can host only ninety-nine clients (whether individual investors or institutions) assuming that each has a portfolio of at least \$1 million dollars or as many as five hundred if each investor can come up with at least \$5 million. See Lowenstein *When Genius Failed* for a detailed discussion, particularly 24-27.

⁵⁶ “American speculators like Packer are able to do to the world’s currencies that which is forbidden to them in the major stock exchanges of America,” notes Jerry Varsava (95). Peter Gowan sees this sort of speculative raiding on currencies as “*full-scale financial warfare against states*” (120, italics in the original). In 1998, LTCM was at the controls with other hedge funds as capital flight devastated national economies by triggering currency devaluations in countries like Indonesia, South Korea, and Thailand (Brenner). *Cosmopolis*’s Packer Capital is implicated in such activities; recall that Eric’s former employee Richard Sheets (Benno Levin) is a currency analyst *specializing in the Thai baht* (191). Sheet’s various syndromes might have something to do with his culpability in spreading the “Asian flu.”

Founded by John Meriwether, the legendary Salomon Brothers bond trader who figured prominently in Michael Lewis's *Liar's Poker*,⁵⁷ LTCM boasted a can't-miss roster of human capital. In addition to the seasoned traders and various PhDs in finance and computer science that Meriwether scooped from academia, two of the founding partners (Robert Merton and Myron Scholes) went on to win the 1997 Nobel prize in economics. Yet another partner, David Mullins, was recruited directly from his position as Alan Greenspan's second-in-command at the Federal Reserve. Opening for business in 1994, LTCM had snared the best and brightest as well as ensuring access to the huge pools of capital and information available to central bankers.⁵⁸ A bevy of investors ranging from banks to celebrities to pension funds to academic endowments put up a collective \$1.25 billion. It was, as Roger Lowenstein notes, the largest start-up ever (39). The massive initial capitalization was key to Meriwether's strategy. LTCM proposed to take advantage of trades with such slight margins that they wouldn't be worth pursuing unless in volume. In addition to the capital raised by investors, Meriwether proposed leveraging Long-Term's capital by thirty times or more. "To make a decent profit on such tiny spreads," explains Lowenstein, "Long-Term would have to multiply its bet many, many times by borrowing" (27). The catch, of course, is that if Long-Term could earn returns from their initial seed money *and* borrowed capital, it was also potentially exposed to similarly huge losses on the downside of a bad deal. If Meriwether and company ever made the wrong

⁵⁷ A colleague of Meriwether's at Salomon Brothers, Craig Coats, was caricatured as Sherman McCoy in Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (Dunbar 82).

⁵⁸ This familiarity bordered on outright cronyism. Peter Gowan notes that at the same time that LTCM held a sizable position in the Italian bond market, one of its major investors was the Italian central bank. In fact, eight state banks were "strategic investors" in LTCM, providing it with "enough insider information to foretell the future" (122).

bet, the consequences could be catastrophic. So why expose themselves to such risk? Quite simply, LTCM was supremely confident in the models devised by its in-house geniuses. “From the outset, the plan for LTCM had been to put into practice the mathematical theories financial economists had developed” (Taylor 257). Merton and Scholes were not figurehead appointments made to reassure nervous investors, far from it. In fact, it would not be much of a stretch to suggest that what Merton and Scholes offered went beyond expertise—Meriwether had recruited two of the creators of the modern financial markets.

Along with Fischer Black in the early 1970s, Scholes came up with a framework for pricing stock options (later refined by Merton). Mark Taylor calls this innovation “a seismic event in financial economics whose reverberations are still being felt” (250). Their “Eureka!” moment came with the recognition that volatility in the price of options relative to an underlying asset could be derived from a heat-transfer equation (Taylor 251). In other words, the movement of prices in the market is explicable in terms of thermodynamics. One might say that when *Cosmopolis*’s Eric Packer looks for order in the market and nature, they are responsible for what he finds. The idea that market behaviour can be distilled into a series of economic laws is hardly revolutionary. Generations of first-year economics students were already intimately acquainted with the laws of supply and demand. The claim that these laws can be calculated with the same precision as the laws of physics, though, is another story entirely. What the Black-Scholes model promised was the ability to quantify a host of second-order phenomena (derivatives, particularly futures, see below). By coming up with a consistent valuation

for volatility, Black-Scholes effectively put a price on risk. This is no small matter. With parallel developments in information technology—namely the exponential increases in computing power—the formidable calculations involved were soon made practical for everyday application. It took professional economists a little while to catch on; Black-Scholes amounted to a very long, slowly burning fuse. When it finally detonated, the derivatives market quite literally exploded.

Derivatives are contracts that derive their value from some underlying asset (like an option on a stock). A futures contract in grain, for example, would obligate the owner of the contract to buy a shipment of grain at both a specific price and date. With a guaranteed buyer, the farmer is hedged against the risk that the price of his crop may fall. Of course, if the price of grain rises, the farmer has to forgo the possibility of windfall profits since he has contracted for the lower price. On the other side of the deal, the contract-holder is hedged against the possibility that the price of grain may rise. The farmer's risk (a drop in price) and the buyer's risk (a rise in price) effectively cancel each other out. In America, derivatives trading began in earnest in nineteenth century commodity markets, but it did not hit its stride until the 1970s as derivatives became the favoured way to cope with increasing volatility in the financial markets.⁵⁹ By 1971, creeping inflation due to the costs of the Vietnam War and 'Great Society' social programmes knocked the United States off the gold standard. This brought an end to the 1944 Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates, allowing currencies to float relative to one another. Mark Taylor describes this as the beginning of a new era when money and

⁵⁹ "Derivatives became the primary instrument for managing risk," explains Taylor. "Derivatives provide a way to shift risk from people who do not want it to people who are willing to bear risk for the possibility of a profitable return" (166).

capital become *spectral*, because “floating signifiers unmoored from any stable referent had neither secure nor predictable value” (128). This prompted an explosion in financial speculation as new markets emerged for futures contracts on currencies and US Treasuries (seen as the closest thing to a sure bet in this new environment). Several developments in 1973 intensified the new volatility. First, the United States loosened its restrictions on pension funds and endowments that kept them from investing in derivatives like options (Taylor 347). This provided a huge new pool of capital to fuel the above-mentioned explosion in the financial markets. Second, the Chicago Board of Trade opened an Options Exchange. According to Taylor, this standardized options and futures contracts, “making them much easier to use and hence more popular” (167). Finally, 1973 also saw the first major energy crisis as OPEC energy exporters embargoed Western supporters of Israel in the Yom Kippur War. The resulting oil shock—a barrel of oil effectively quadrupled in price—sharply increased inflation, further roiling the already unsettled markets.

Taken together, these events usher in a new era of financial speculation. Floating exchange rates injected a new and seemingly permanent degree of risk into the financial markets. In turn, new and ever more exotic classes of derivatives were “engineered” to manage volatility. Merton called this the financial innovation spiral: “a constant switching back and forth from banks and universities where innovations happened, to markets where the new products were ‘commoditised’, becoming cheaper and more accessible. The new markets then became the basis for further generation of more sophisticated products, and the spiral would continue upward” (Dunbar 113). As computational power

improves, the augmented ability to hedge old risks perversely makes new ones appear—in the sense that they are both *rendered visible* and *generated* by improved models. The confusion about whether these newly discovered risks were there all along (in the sense that a more powerful microscope allows us to *see* more) or to a degree created through the very act of observation is endemic to the increasing complexity of these models. Indeed, there is a strong argument to be made that to a large degree risk is an artifact of the continued refinement of the conceptual tools used to identify and manage it. This introduces widespread confusion as the speculative measures designed to reduce volatility actually increase it. Paradoxically, by hedging any given set of risks in particular, speculative activity (through derivatives trading) exacerbates risk in general, thus contributing to the overall volatility of the market. Harnessed by the financial innovation spiral, though, volatility fuels economic expansion in a virtuous cycle. In effect, the development of ever more sophisticated financial instruments like derivatives allowed traders to make the most of the economic boom (through leveraging) but contrary to the most dewy-eyed claims of prognosticators, this enhanced capability was not in itself enough to “tame” the business cycle. And when bust inevitably followed, all that leverage exerts a heavy toll. “Finance is a powerful stimulus on the way up, and can be a powerful depressant on the way down” (Henwood *Wall Street* 158).

The resident geniuses at LTCM—which “seemed more like a think tank than a money factory” (Dunbar 150)—were willing to stake their reputations on Merton’s financial innovation spiral. That’s not to say they forecasted *only* clear skies and smooth sailing. They were alert to the adverse effects of the notoriously fickle market psychology

—the possibility that panicked investors might withdraw their funds and trigger an economic reversal. The philosophy at LTCM, though, was that with their mammoth capitalization, insistence that investors commit to unheard-of time horizons (hence “long-term”), and bleeding-edge strategies of dynamic hedging, they could effectively wait out any crisis and weather any storm. At the time, their confidence seemed reasonable enough. The Black-Scholes formula and by extension LTCM’s investment strategy depended on several assumptions about the nature of the market, assumptions that were part of the then-reigning economic orthodoxy. None was more important than a theory known as the efficient market hypothesis (EMH). An efficient market is one where prices reflect all available and up-to-date information; it is one where there are no mispriced assets. Efficiency, in other words, functions as a regulative ideal. The mechanism by which efficiency is enforced is what economists call the law of one price: assuming accurate information, identical products will sell for the same price across different markets when expressed in the same currency. The law of one price and the assumption of convergence are part of an understanding of the market as a general equilibrium system, one where risks and returns balance out and the speed of information entering the market correlates to the spread in prices. The dynamic nature of the market, though, ensures that the ideal of equilibrium can never be realized, only approximated.⁶⁰ There will always be

⁶⁰ Joseph Stiglitz won a Nobel prize in economics for explaining why exactly this is so. Efficient markets presume perfect information. In reality, though, information is asymmetric: one party, whether the buyer or seller, has more information than another. Indeed, one could argue that efficiency runs counter to the very structural dynamic of capitalism, which is by definition excessive and imbalanced. A perfectly efficient market would be perfectly illiquid (and thus devoid of the characteristic feature of capitalism: surplus value). “Just as systems that tend toward equilibrium eventually approach entropy,” explains Taylor, “so markets whose efficiency increases approach a point where arbitrage becomes impossible” (247).

inefficiencies (unbalanced prices); a situation exacerbated by spreading volatility of the post-Bretton Woods era.

Of course, for savvy traders, a profit can always be made from exploiting inefficiencies through arbitrage. Arbitrage is the pursuit of unearned profit; unearned because all the trader has to do once making his play is sit back and wait for the spread to converge (i.e. wait for the market to become more efficient). In identifying these spreads, arbitrageurs both profit from them *and* in the process rationalize the market since the very act of profit-taking ensures prices will converge. By individually profiting from inefficiencies, arbitrageurs make the market as a whole more efficient—the invisible hand shaking itself. For EMH advocates, arbitrage is the mechanism by which their theory becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Ironically, though, as the more glaring inefficiencies are targeted for arbitrage and ironed out of the market, profit margins shrink. “The only way to continue making the same profit would be to pour even more money into the trade—thus hastening its demise” (Dunbar 61). Arbitrageurs had to either find new opportunities (hence the mania in the mid-1990s for emerging markets like post-Soviet Russia and the Asian “Tiger” economies) or devise new ways to wring profit from even the slightest inefficiencies. As they were chasing after smaller and smaller inefficiencies to exploit, traders had to conversely make larger and larger deals in order to realize a profit, instituting the widespread leveraging that became LTCM’s stock in trade. At the same time, however, all of this leveraging prompted a widespread collateral crisis.

Growing in terms of sheer numbers and complexity, financial instruments quickly outstripped any attempt at regulation. Financial market oversight was admittedly lax in

the 1980s and 1990s—aside from the pragmatic calculation that the government simply couldn't keep up with the pace of innovation, oversight ran counter to the general enthusiasm for deregulation that characterized the Thatcher-Reagan era. Perhaps the most important example of this laissez-faire attitude came in the form of loosened or non-existent margin requirements. Margin trading means that the speculator puts as little money up front as possible: with less collateral required for each trade, a higher volume of trades can be made, allowing investors to leverage their limited capital.⁶¹ Furthermore, the very definition of what counted as collateral was transformed—it was no longer thought of as a reserve that had to be held “outside” of the market.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, new financial products made possible by computers and networks vastly increased the opportunity for leverage and thereby created a collateral crisis. More and more money was being borrowed on the same collateral base. In addition to this, the nature of collateral changed in ways that allowed investors to use securities and derivatives as collateral for additional loans, which in turn were used for yet further investments. This led to faster growth in the financial sector than in the real economy and therefore to a shrinkage of the latter *relative to the former*. The result of these developments was an inverted pyramiding process in which the foundation of financial markets was virtually disappearing (Taylor 253, italics in the original).

For some, the looming collateral crisis was less a reason to panic than cause for celebration. In fact, when John Meriwether founded LTCM in 1994, his goal was to *accelerate* this process, taking it to its theoretical limit. LTCM, explains Nicholas Dunbar, was based on “a vision of zero capital and infinite leverage” (190). In effect, Meriwether envisioned a perfectly engineered structure, a series of “money machines” each tasked with identifying an inefficiency in the market, smoothing it out by extracting excess liquidity, and from these profits providing the collateral for the next generation of

⁶¹ To the point that Wall Street as a whole was leveraged 25:1 by the late 1990s (Taylor 252).

machines (Dunbar 114). With each turn of the financial innovation spiral, the entire structure moved further and further away from its original capital base; the money machines were in effect self-perpetuating. “As the technology of risk management continued to improve, the tiny sliver of equity underneath the inverted pyramid would vanish completely” (Dunbar 190). There was only one thing keeping LTCM from financial nirvana. It was *too* profitable.

By 1997 LTCM’s capitalization increased to over \$7 billion. This was a problem because the larger the equity capital base, the more difficult to earn high returns (because they are calculated as a percentage of that base). Since reported returns are the measure of performance in the financial services industry, LTCM had to continue to grow (no small matter at a time when market indices like the S&P 500 were reporting returns of thirty percent or more). But as profits added to its financial bulk, the rate of return dropped. It was caught on a treadmill that was simultaneously speeding up *and* getting shorter. Since their entire strategy was based on achieving enough velocity for the machines to become self-sustaining, the solution was not to slow the treadmill down, but turn it into a runway by lengthening it. They could do this by diminishing their equity base; the smaller it became, the larger the returns—calculated as a percentage of that base. Meriwether and his partners made an outrageous decision in December of that year (only weeks after Merton and Scholes were awarded the Nobel prize in economics): they forced many of their investors to cash out by returning their initial stake in the firm. In this manner, they reduced their equity base by over a third even as their position in the market grew. Some charge that this was little more than simple greed on the part of LTCM’s partners since

they were in effect increasing their own stake as a percentage of the fund. Whether that was the case, paring down equity was certainly in keeping with LTCM's core philosophy: to reduce their collateral to the barest minimum since anything beyond that exerted drag on growth.⁶² Confident they had just enough on hand to keep the money machines lubricated with liquidity, the partners believed that their sophisticated hedging strategies would ultimately render equity unnecessary. Furthermore, since the interlocking set of money machines created a system of multiply redundant failsafes against any one of the machines "jamming," they believed that it was capable of redistributing almost any degree of excess volatility and decided to leverage their exposure to the market accordingly. LTCM was on its way to becoming a perpetual motion machine, tirelessly wending its way through the circuits of global commerce.

Ironically, the very decision that brought the partners so tantalizingly close to realizing their dream of pure financial intermediation (i.e. circulating within an entirely *transactional* space, the notional market) proved fatal to the whole enterprise. The tragedy was twofold. First, by cashing out some of their initial investors to reduce their equity base, they removed the collateral that cushioned them against the possibility—by their lights, exceedingly remote—that one of the gambles might go awry. As long as their carefully calculated and exquisitely reasoned-out presumptions about the nature of the market held up, this wouldn't be a problem. Second, they also failed to recognize the impact of their actions on the market itself. The scale of Long-Term's speculation transformed the initial conditions on which their calculations were based. By December

⁶² Investors, one of the partners admitted were "viewed as a necessary evil. Ultimately the fund was to become employee-owned. By that definition, you're setting up a situation where investors are going to lose out" (Dunbar 190).

1998—within a year of their hubristic decision to cash out some of their investors—LTCM was insolvent, its offices shuttered, and its partners disgraced. The fund’s fall from grace was the most epic collapse in American financial history.⁶³

The actual chain of events began on August 17, 1998 with Russia’s announcement that it was going to default on a massive loan from the IMF and devalue the rouble. LTCM was hedged against one or the other event occurring, but not both simultaneously. While it lost a great deal of money, it was in no immediate danger. The crisis, however, continued to build. As other funds took large losses, the market grew dangerously unstable. Contagion from the Russian default/devaluation spread instability across the increasingly interconnected global economy. “New financial instruments, pyramiding leverage, markets more closely connected and operating in real time, the instantaneous transmission of news and information as well as a significant increase in the number of people in the market made the potential for extraordinary damage much more likely” (Taylor 261). As the ripples reverberated across the world, they grew in size and force, eventually swamping LTCM. Seemingly unrelated trades suddenly nosedived as investors hustled out of the high risk/high reward markets that LTCM was heavily invested in. Liquidity (the availability of which was a crucial assumption in LTCM’s models) fled to safe investments like US Treasuries, causing its money machines to seize up. As it began losing money, its highly leveraged equity base began to disappear, which in turn triggered its automated risk management system to start selling off the more exposed positions. In order to meet its mounting obligations the fund had to sell more and

⁶³ Enron’s implosion two years later eclipsed the Long Term story, but mainly because of the chicanery of its executives. LTCM is a study in hubris, not rampant venality and criminal behaviour.

more of its holdings which, caught in a downdraft, were worth less and less. What's more, because LTCM was extremely secretive in its dealings (since arbitrage profits in particular depend on exploiting a spread before any one else jumps in), its counterparties had no idea about the true extent of its exposure. Fearing the worst, they exerted enormous pressure on the fund, anticipating that unknown number of others would be lining up to do the same. With no room to operate and no air to breathe, Long-Term imploded.

LTCM was far from the only financial institution caught up in the global financial instability, but it fell further, faster, and left a deeper crater than any of its competitors. LTCM's famously high tolerance for risk, eager leveraging and disdain for collateral spawned a "perfect storm," one that threatened the global economy. Its collapse, moreover, implicated the major players on Wall Street because LTCM had, in effect, passed its own collateral crisis onto them. Banking on its unprecedented size and influence, Long-Term demanded (and received) privileged treatment from its creditors from the day it opened up shop. In particular, the partners insisted that banks waive their usual borrowing requirements. "Now, normally when you borrow a bond from, say, Merrill Lynch, you have to post a little bit of extra collateral—maybe a total of \$1,010 on a \$1,000 Treasury and more on a riskier bond," explains Roger Lowenstein.

That \$10 initial margin, equivalent to 1 percent of the bond's value, is called a *haircut*. It's Merrill Lynch's way of protecting itself in case the price of the bond rises. The haircut normally acts as a check on how much you can trade. But if you could avoid the haircut, well, the sky would be the limit. It would be like driving a car that didn't burn gas: you could drive as far as you wished. What's more, the rate of return would be substantially higher—if you didn't have that extra margin tied up at Merrill Lynch. (45)

Avoiding the haircut was a crucial part of LTCM's strategy ("zero capital and infinite leverage"). They made deals with *no* money up front, using them as collateral for yet more deals. At the time of its collapse, Long-Term had booked about \$250 billion worth of liabilities against \$4 billion in equity. On top of that, it held positions worth \$1.25 trillion in derivative trades (unregulated investments that didn't show up on the official balance sheet) (Dunbar 191). As Peter Gowan points out, "the safety of the entire American credit system was apparently threatened by the behaviour of a single, speculative hedge fund" (120). Fearing "systemic risk" the U.S. Federal Reserve was forced to step in, orchestrating a bail-out paid for by many of Long-Term's counterparties (including Merrill Lynch, Goldman Sachs, JP Morgan and other white-shoe investment banks) who were otherwise imperiled by the defunct fund's unsecured debts, both actual and potential. "Global meltdown had been avoided, but it had become obvious that something had fundamentally changed," explained Mark Taylor. "[The] economy of the 1980s and 1990s effectively ended with the failure of Long-Term Capital Management" (263).

Believing they were adequately hedged against volatility in the market, the stewards of LTCM failed to realize how the speculative activity that they pioneered and championed was feeding back into the global economy. As Roger Lowenstein points out, LTCM "got so big it distorted the very markets on whose efficiency the firm relied" (234). Put simply, the rules of the game had changed and LTCM itself was at least partially responsible for (and oblivious to) the shift. The partners, Wall Street veterans and academics alike, were seduced by the elegance of their models. "Why then were these

models not discarded sooner?” Mark Taylor asks. “The answer, it seems, is that people from universities and Wall Street to Main Street wanted to believe in the models. Paradoxically, these economic formulas and models were symptoms of the very desires and emotions they were designed to eliminate” (276). Treating the market as an equilibrium system that functioned according to the laws of Newtonian physics, the LTCM braintrust led a revolution in finance. Ironically, though, their efforts transformed the very nature of the system presumed by their models. The surge in financial speculation, lax regulations and widespread leveraging encouraged what Mark Taylor calls “self-organized criticality,” a tipping point⁶⁴ at which the financial market, complicated in theory, becomes *complex* in reality. Sped-up trading became increasingly self-reflexive as the widespread adoption of derivatives meant that financial activity increasingly consisted of bets made on bets made on bets. Loosened regulations meant that bets on securities and derivatives could be used as collateral for other bets, ensuring that any one trade was increasingly dependent on and connected to a host of unknown others. And widespread leveraging reconfigured the profit-and-loss accounting of debt, transforming it into the index of connectivity and the measure of complexity in the financial system (Taylor 152). In the end, LTCM gambled on the fact that sophisticated models and sheer computing power could enable them to hedge the future. “In this, the fund was not unique. Long-Term was in fact the quintessential fund of the late twentieth-century—an experiment in harnessing the markets to the twin new disciplines of financial economics and computer programming,” Roger Lowenstein concluded. “The belief that tomorrow’s risks can be inferred from yesterday’s prices and volatilities prevails at

⁶⁴ The point where quantity impacts quality, or as Taylor puts it, “*more becomes different*” (290)

virtually every investment bank and trading desk. This was Long-Term's basic mistake, and its stunning losses betrayed the flaw at the very head—at the very brain—of modern finance” (235).

Prisoners of the pleasure principle

Cyber-capital proponents like the guiding lights behind LTCM proclaimed that with the advent of globalization, capital had effectively conquered its outside; the world is remade by (and in the image of) technology. As such, the critic Fredric Jameson suggests that globalization itself is nothing other than “a kind of cyberspace in which money capital reached its ultimate dematerialization as messages which pass instantaneously from one nodal point to another across the former globe, the former material world” (“Culture and Finance Capital” 154).⁶⁵ Cyber-capital, in other words, is no longer subject to *physical* determination. Business at the speed of thought, to borrow the title of Bill Gates's treatise on the subject (1999), takes place in a smooth or frictionless world. Liberated from material constraints, the only curbs on economic growth are wholly *internal* to the process itself.⁶⁶ The utopian promise of both finance capital and cyberspace (hence ‘cyber-capital’) is to “live on its own internal metabolism and circulate without any reference to an older type of content” (Jameson “Culture and Finance Capital” 161). “Money has taken a turn. All wealth has become wealth for its own sake. There's no other kind of enormous wealth,” Eric Packer's chief of theory marvels.

⁶⁵ Recall DeLillo's musings from *Underworld*: “Is cyberspace a thing within the world or is it the other way around? Which contains the other and how can you tell for sure?” (827). Globalization, according to Jameson, is the world *cyberspaced*.

⁶⁶ One such formulation is “Moore's law,” the observation from Intel founder Gordon Moore that the speed of computer processing chips doubles every eighteen months.

“Money has lost its narrative quality the way painting did once upon a time. Money is talking to itself” (77).

In this sense, cyber-capital resembles nothing so much as a *universalized pleasure principle*.⁶⁷ I am referring, of course, to the keystone of what Freud called his *economic* model of the mind. At its most basic level, Freud suggests, “the mental apparatus endeavours to keep the quantity of excitation present in it as low as possible or at least to keep it constant” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 277). What he initially designated as the pleasure-unpleasure principle strikes a balance between too little pleasure (privation) and too much (enjoyment).⁶⁸ In its abbreviation, Freud’s concept loses some of this specificity, so for those unfamiliar with it and suspicious of him (i.e. Freud the ‘pansexualist’), the pleasure principle sounds more like a hedonistic mission statement than what it really is: a homeostatic mechanism or, ‘hydraulics’ of the psyche. While a comprehensive treatment of Freud’s metapsychological account about what precedes and underpins the ego is beyond the scope of my discussion here, I would like to take a moment to further this comparison between his speculative model of the libidinal economy and the orthodoxy of the efficient market hypothesis: both are conceived as self-regulating systems that tend toward equilibrium. In fact, when economists refer to the *efficiency* of the market, they rely on a concept that is strikingly reminiscent of Freud’s principle of *constancy*. Information spreads through global financial markets in much the

⁶⁷ Žižek offers a similar argument about the universalized pleasure principle in a slightly different context (*Parallax* 310).

⁶⁸ One can have *too much* pleasure. Freud’s inheritor, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls this *jouissance*: the paradoxical experience of pleasure as excessive, obscene and painful. Slavoj Žižek, in turn, translates *jouissance* simply as enjoyment. For my purposes, enjoyment designates that quantum of pleasure that Freud postulates as existing *beyond* the pleasure principle. For a much more involved discussion of enjoyment, see chapter two.

same way as libidinal energy flows through the unconscious realm of the primary process. Moreover, just as arbitrage enforces the law of one price by identifying a spread between prices, taking profits and in the process ensuring that prices converge, the pleasure principle maintains the constancy of stimulus through the reduction of tension.

I should note that the pleasure principle is only one of what Freud insisted were *two* principles of mental functioning. The second principle modifies the first, subordinating the desire for pleasure (which is to say, the tendency toward equilibrium) to the demand for self-preservation. The pleasure principle, in other words, is inhibited by the reality principle, which requires the “postponement of satisfaction... and the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure” (*Beyond* 278). The reality principle introduces a minimal degree of self-reflexivity into what would otherwise be libidinal autarky, a closed circuit of self-satisfaction, since it presupposes the awareness of one’s surroundings. The frustrating experience of the external world as *constraining* is the *sine qua non* of consciousness, “the beginnings of thought” (Laplanche and Pontalis 380). Accordingly, the goal of our waking activity is to cultivate our environment so that it no longer poses an obstacle to the pursuit of pleasure (i.e. equilibrium). Technology designates the cumulative process of mastering external reality in the service of the pleasure principle; “it is literally altering the *physis* of the world, adjusting the inbuilt logic of nature and the spatio-temporal continuum to suit itself” (Brennan *Exhausting* 131).

The advent of cyber-capital, though, marks an epochal shift as the logic of development overtakes the reality principle. As Renata Salecl explains, “technology is

perceived as something that can produce more reality than nature itself” (96). In its latest incarnation it has progressed *beyond* the point where it enables us to control our environment, which is to say, to rearrange and reconstitute nature in accordance with the pleasure principle. Today, cyber-capital is capable of producing a new environment *ex nihilo*—this virtual reality or *second nature*, moreover, is congruent with the pleasure principle from the outset. Cyber-capital, suggests Antonio Di Ciaccia, unleashes “a hermeneutic utopia in the field of economics,” one where—as we saw in the case of LTCM—models overtake reality (6). To the degree that we can no longer imagine any external constraint, obstacle or limit to the realization of a world market, we are prisoners of the pleasure principle, trapped in a hermeneutic utopia of our own devising. “We create our own frenzy, our own mass convulsions, driven by thinking machines that we have no final authority over.⁶⁹ The frenzy is barely noticeable most of the time. It’s simply how we live,” Vija tells Eric in *Cosmopolis* (85).

To put this transformation in a broad historical perspective, a traditional society is one where productive forces remain relatively undeveloped, meaning that the reality principle (i.e. scarcity) predominates. The centuries-long modernizing process gradually corrects this imbalance. Development sublimates reality even as it precipitates pleasure in the form of technology (‘progress’). The former has been common knowledge at least since Marx (“All that is solid melts into air”), but the latter remains difficult to grasp, largely because we remain unconscious of it. “Technology,” suggests DeLillo, “has an

⁶⁹ This image nicely captures the spectacle of Long-Term Capital Management’s much-prized automated risk management system. Designed to protect the firm’s capital in the event of unexpected swings in the market, this “thinking machine” exacerbated the Long-Term’s death spiral. Once it was triggered, it contributed to plunging prices by selling off assets.

enormous will to realize in three dimensions whatever becomes theoretically possible. Every limit must be reached. That's my sense of the psychic drive it exerts on us" (Barron). Real abstraction, the way in which the logic of the pleasure principle is materialized in technology, *the will which is not our own*, is nothing other than the unconscious.⁷⁰ "[This] 'abstraction' does not exist only in our (financial speculator's) misperception of social reality; it is 'real' in the precise sense of determining the very structure of material social processes," explains Žižek. "The fate of whole strata of populations, and sometimes of whole countries, can be decided by the 'solipsistic' speculative dance of Capital, which pursues its goal of profitability with a blessed indifference to the way its movements will affect social reality" (*Fragile* 15).

A globalized world—which is to say a world rationalized by cyber-capital—is a world upended, one where the pleasure principle (i.e. the market) supplants the reality principle as the determinate basis of everyday life. The pleasure principle in effect absorbs the reality principle when its abstract logic is directly realized not just *in* the world, but *as the world*, "the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet's living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere. Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole" (*Cosmopolis* 24). The question, then, is that if cyber-capital is capable of molding reality in its image, then what is to keep it from taking the "natural next step," as Eric Packer puts it (207), and directly realizing itself in the world? Put another way, how does one explain the persistence of unpleasure in a world fully rationalized by the pleasure principle? The reality principle historically accounted for the

⁷⁰ Žižek defines it as "*the form of thought whose ontological status is not that of thought*, that is to say, the form of thought [previous and] external to thought itself," what Lacan called the symbolic order (*Sublime* 19, italics in original).

existence of unpleasure, but only at the cost of externalizing it as nature, “red in tooth and claw” to quote Tennyson. Its recent eclipse confronts us with the realization that freedom from physical determination is not the same thing as freedom from any sort of determination whatsoever; unpleasure is inherent to the pleasure principle (‘enjoyment’). Lacan was among the first to recognize this: “As soon as we try to articulate the reality principle so as to make it depend on the physical world to which Freud’s purpose seems to require us to relate it, it is clear that it functions, in fact, to isolate the subject from reality” (*Ethics* 46). Here, we come to the crux of the issue. Even as we shape reality in our own image through technology, we suffer a debilitating loss of reality.⁷¹ “Reality-testing is suspect because the ego has constructed the reality it then proceeds to test” (Brennan *History* 43). As Mark Taylor observes apropos of LTCM, “far from the referent disappearing, the conflict between models and reality brought the global economy to the brink of collapse” (241).

As Long-Term’s faith in their models (‘money machines’) and Eric’s confidence in his ability to chart the yen demonstrate, the breakdown of cyber-capital as a cosmopolitical ideal is both cause and consequence of a ‘collateral crisis’—which is to say, *a crisis in the concept of collateral*, of reality itself. “As the economy evolves from level to level, it becomes increasingly spectral until it is virtually nothing but the play of floating signifiers endlessly recycling in recursive loops that are unmoored from what once was called the “real” economy,” explains Taylor. “The real however, does not simply disappear but is temporarily repressed and eventually returns to disrupt what had seemed to replace it. The spectral economy continues to be haunted by the real economy, which

⁷¹ I discuss a similar phenomenon in the previous chapter under the rubric of superego fundamentalism.

hides but does not vanish. When the repressed finally returns, collateral damage is difficult to contain” (180). Eric turns the speculative game of bets made on bets into a truly existential gamble, one where the last vestige of nature in a thoroughly postmodernized world and only seemingly inalienable form of collateral—the body, that “older type of content”—is put into play. Leveraging is transformed here from an investing strategy to an act of metaphysical bootstrapping. The ultimate barrier that Eric seeks to surpass is neither market nor man but mortality itself. “He’d always wanted to become quantum dust, transcending his body mass, the soft tissue over the bones, the muscle and fat. The idea was to live outside the given limits, in a chip, on a disk, as data, in whirl, in radiant spin, a consciousness saved from void” (206).

The ideology of cyber-capital finds its fullest expression in these moments of ‘collateral crisis’, whether provoked by Eric’s desire to leave his body behind or LTCM’s refusal to pay the usual margin requirements to its creditors to cover its trading positions. Not coincidentally, this minimal collateral requirement is otherwise known within the financial industry as a ‘haircut’—the ‘trim’ that institutional lenders require of their borrowers to serve as insurance against the risk of default.⁷² The haircut functions as a reality principle articulated to the symbolic machinery of Capital rather than empirical reality. With this in mind, DeLillo’s decision to structure *Cosmopolis* around Eric’s quest for, of all things, a *haircut* makes a great deal of sense. Many of the novel’s reviewers were puzzled by this element, dismissing it as a senseless banality or even as a satiric assault on capitalism by rendering Eric’s odyssey in mock-epic terms. A haircut, though,

⁷² In his otherwise useful reading of *Cosmopolis*, Jerry Varsava points out “that in the vernacular of ‘the Street’ to ‘take a haircut’ suggests that one’s investments have been rather severely trimmed by unfavorable market pressures” (103). Equating the haircut with a simple loss is not entirely accurate (see “Haircut”).

establishes a metaphoric connection between the physical ('body') and the financial ('collateral'). It also slows down speculation—the haircut, an embodied metaphor if there ever was one, is the only thing keeping markets from realizing the theoretical possibility of achieving zero capital and infinite leverage.

CONCLUSION

From the New Economy to the New Russia: Cyberpunk's Last Frontier

"I want to suggest that our faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely the whole world system of present-day multinational capitalism. The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself."

—Fredric Jameson

"Fully imagined cultural futures were the luxury of another day, one in which 'now' was of some greater duration. For us, of course, things can change so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents' have insufficient 'now' to stand on. We have no future because our present is too volatile.... We have only risk management. The spinning of the given moment's scenarios. Pattern recognition."

—William Gibson

"Russia's state structure and urban society (specifically Moscow and St. Petersburg) is presently, I think, about as inherently gangsterish, in every conceivable manifestation, from top to bottom, as any organized society has ever been."

—Jack Womack

The future of cyberpunk, improbably, lies in the present. William Gibson's latest novel *Pattern Recognition* (2003) takes place in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and was in fact the first novel by a major author to probe this terrible wound to the American psyche. It excited no little comment for the relative dearth of near-future speculation in its pages—a significant departure for one of cyberpunk's most innovative voices and author of its ur-text *Neuromancer* (1984).¹ *Pattern Recognition* features Cayce Pollard, who has been tasked with investigating the origin of a mysterious Internet phenomenon known

¹ "There is one part of this that has been unexpectedly pleasant, and that's the death of the term cyberpunk," Gibson tells Candas Jane Dorsey, describing his travels in support of *Pattern Recognition*. "In this whole tour, I've never heard it used by anyone under forty—I've heard less about cyberpunk, and relatively less about *Neuromancer*—the tour has largely been about *Pattern Recognition*" (11).

only as “the footage” and who is still in shock over her father’s disappearance in the World Trade Center attacks of 9/11. A much sought-after “coolhunter” who has the uncanny ability to dowse in the global market for emergent consumer trends, Cayce’s trade secret is that she has a physiological response to the world of labels and brands. In this, she is something of a reflection of Gibson, who describes himself to an interviewer as susceptible to “information sickness... a problematic sensitivity to semiotic fragments” (McCaffery 277). For Cayce, the faculty of aesthetic distinction—precisely, taste—is experienced not as the Kantian ideal of distanced contemplation, but as visceral immediacy.² It is precisely for this critique, which does not judge but reflexively responds, that Cayce is contracted by a transnational advertising firm to discover the secret behind the footage, “the most brilliant marketing ploy of this very young century. And new. Somehow entirely new” (65). The footage is comprised of 135 fragments whose narrative trajectory—if there is one—is a matter of furious debate among the subculture which has sprung up around it. In her search for the source of the footage, Cayce finds herself at the centre of a post-Cold War spy plot involving corporate espionage, a Russian oligarch, and the disappearance of her own father—a former spy—whose job as a security consultant took him to Manhattan on the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001. Cayce discovers that the footage itself is inspired by a similar tragedy, one reaffirming Balzac’s dictate that all great wealth is built upon a crime. In this case, the footage is indelibly marked by the violence of Russia’s gangster capitalism and it is only by belatedly realizing that what she is witnessing is a work of mourning, that

² “She has no way of knowing how she knows,” writes Gibson. “Cayce’s contract for a consultation of this sort specifies that she absolutely not be asked to critique anything, or provide creative input of any sort. She is only there to serve as a very specialized piece of human litmus paper” (12-13).

Cayce is finally able to work through her own trauma and discovers that her physiological reaction to commodity culture is a form of panic disorder.

In its return to the present Gibson's novel is better thought of as continuing a trend rather than starting one. It owes a debt (both personal and professional) to Jack Womack, whose black comedy *Let's Put the Future Behind Us* (1997) takes place amidst the "primitive accumulation" of state assets by gangster capitalists in 1990s Russia. Womack, better known for his bleak vision and linguistic experimentation in the cyberpunk *Dryco Chronicles* than for "straight" fiction, once noted: "When I first saw Moscow in March 1992, I knew I was finally seeing the world as it is and the world as I perceive it in congruence" (309). This chapter examines representations of Russian gangster capitalism in both *Let's Put The Future Behind Us* and *Pattern Recognition* in the hopes of explaining cyberpunk's (re)turn to the present. That this reflects a broader transition and not simply an anomaly is worth emphasizing. Both Gibson and Womack have stated—or at least implied—that they plan to eschew overtly speculative writing in the future, validating Istvan Csicsery-Ronay's offhanded comment that cyberpunk was "a paradoxical form of realism" all along (182). Gibson's next novel *Spook Country* (to be released in August 2007) is, if not quite a sequel to *Pattern Recognition*, at least set in the same world, which is to say, our own. Though there are no novels immediately forthcoming from Womack, he told Stephen Brown that upon wrapping up the *Dryco Chronicles* in his latest novel *Going, Going, Gone* (2000) he intended to leave cyberpunk behind. "I feel much more assured now, working with contemporary material in a variety of voices, than I did when I first started the series, and felt most comfortable by taking

what was going on and moving it ahead by twenty years,” he explains. “So thereafter I’ll be sticking to books set in contemporary times or at most two years in the future” (Brown 55).

When did cyberpunk’s near future become our present—or, more accurately, our proximate past? And, just as important, *where* did this take place? I suggest that post-Soviet Russia provides the answer to both questions. Womack is interested in the phase immediately following the transition when a host of state assets were abruptly privatized and capitalism wasn’t so much introduced as unleashed (ca. 1992-93). *Let’s Put the Future Behind Us* dramatizes the lawlessness and frontier-style violence that erupted as the state disintegrated and competition became a matter of not just free market orthodoxy, but quite literally life and death. The action of Gibson’s novel, in contrast, is set in the aftermath of September 2001. In the intervening decade between the events portrayed in *Let’s Put the Future Behind Us* and *Pattern Recognition*, wealth was consolidated, order re-established and Russia smoothly integrated into the circuits of global commerce.³

Cyberpunk, of course, is hardly monolithic and the considerable differences between Womack and Gibson are evident in the period each chooses to focus on (old New Russia or new New Russia). Each author portrays a Russia most in keeping with his own particular cyberpunk vision. For Womack, the grim reality of post-Soviet Russia in the throes of transition to a market economy (ca. 1992) uncannily resembles the dystopian

³ A minor character in *Pattern Recognition* provides Cayce with a brief taxonomy, based on his experience finding a financial backer for a Russian film shoot:

He’s an old new Russian. Made it looting his own economy, basically, but there’s no long-term future in that. Russia’s had a GNP on par with Holland, but that’s changing. The new New Russians are into transparency: companies that actually have books, pay taxes. They’ve figured out that you can make even more money, that way. It’s no accident that Putin always described himself as a lawyer. (192)

society he had spent his career writing about. For Gibson, Putin-era Russia (ca. 2002) is merely one more node in the transnational network of capital, “a world where there are no mirrors to find yourself on the other side of, all experience having been reduced, by the spectral hand of marketing, to price-point variations on the same thing” (*Pattern Recognition* 341). What he does find remarkable about Russia’s recent experience is the opportunity it afforded to a select few to amass staggering fortunes in virtually no time at all while enjoying virtual anonymity. For Gibson, the offstage machinations of a New Russian oligarch functions in much the same way as the artificial intelligences of *Neuromancer* or Josef Virek of *Count Zero* (1986): as an amoral capitalist demiurge; indeed, as the personification of capital itself. In this, *Pattern Recognition* not only returns to the territory that Gibson originally staked out in his debut, *Neuromancer*, it can be read as a rewriting, a retracing, of Gibson’s first and most famous novel. The parallels begin with doppelgänger protagonists—*Neuromancer*’s cyber-cowboy Case and *Pattern Recognition*’s coolhunter Cayce⁴—but they go much further than that. In fact, two decades and two completed cyberpunk trilogies removed from his first effort, *Pattern Recognition* provides an excellent opportunity to recognize that Gibson has been writing the same story over and over, a claim that I shall return to at the end of the chapter and in the spirit of providing concluding comments on the dissertation as a whole.⁵ In order to explain how these writers came to put the future behind them, my first task is to consider

⁴ “Actually,” she finds herself explaining, “it should be pronounced ‘Casey’ ... but I don’t” (*Pattern Recognition* 31)

⁵ The first “Sprawl” trilogy consists of *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero*, and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988). I will confine most of my comments on Gibson’s cyberpunk to *Neuromancer*. Gibson’s second “Bridge” trilogy consists of *Virtual Light* (1993), *Idoru* (1996), and *All Tomorrow’s Parties* (1999). For a perceptive—if brief—treatment of this second trilogy, see Annesley (“Netscapes”). Gibson also co-authored, with Bruce Sterling, *The Difference Engine* (1991), a novel set in Victorian England (‘steampunk’). A collection of his short stories, many of which orbit the first trilogy, were published as *Burning Chrome* (1986).

the cyberpunk phenomenon in more detail, starting with its foremost practitioner.

Side Effects

In *No Maps For These Territories* (2003), a documentary made just after the publication of *All Tomorrow's Parties*—quite possibly the final novel in Gibson's cyberpunk career—the author sheds some light on his creative process, performs drive-by cultural criticism and puts the cyberpunk phenomenon in its personal and professional context (Jack Womack and Bruce Sterling also put in an appearance). *No Maps* consists of the filmmaker driving Gibson around while peppering him with questions, leaving him to riff on a variety of topics. While visually incongruous—the backseat forecaster—the film is nonetheless surprisingly effective. In one of the more intriguing exchanges, Gibson discusses the origins of the Internet in the work of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), a research institute within the U.S. Department of Defense. Originally founded in order to erase the Cold War science gap opened up by the Soviet's successful Sputnik satellite launch in 1957, DARPA developed a decentralized communications structure in 1969. ARPANET linked government research facilities with universities in order to improve access to a handful of powerful computers; the application of just such a decentralized network in the event of a nuclear strike was also widely noted (i.e. to ensure the continuity of government). The Internet as we know it today grew out of the packet-switching technology originally developed for ARPANET's primitive telecommunications network, one that at its inception included only a few nodes on the West coast. Gibson suggests that its rapid transformation from an extremely

specialized, hieratic discourse into a mass medium (or a crass one, given the proliferation of online pornography) is the great unintended consequence of our time. “It’s my understanding that what we call Internet grew out of that as a completely unplanned side effect,” Gibson muses. “I rather believe that if that side effect could have been foreseen, the people who ordered those mainframes connected would have had second thoughts because it will eventually bring about their extinction, the extinction of the nation-state as we know it” (*No Maps*).⁶

What is most interesting about Gibson’s hypothetical scenario is the suggestion there was a point when things could have gone either way. What if the mainframes were left unconnected because those in charge had “second thoughts,” recognizing the possible implications—in hindsight, the certain consequences—of their decision? Gibson offers this in the spirit of an intriguing counterfactual proposition, but it is far from idle speculation. I argue that to pose this question (‘what if?’) is to indulge in what is perhaps the most ubiquitous fantasy in today’s risk society: the retroactive moment of decision when we actively chose the path we are already on. What makes this fantasy particularly compelling is that in an age of unintended side effects (recalling Beck), we are liable for that which we have no final authority over. This generates unbearable anxiety because, as per my discussion of reflexivity and risk in chapter two, even though we are *responsible*, we are not necessarily *in control*. Gibson’s hypothetical scenario, then, functions as a consoling fantasy because it depicts the moment when we were in control (and lost it). It

⁶ Gibson’s claim appears well on the way to bearing itself out. For example, the various financial crises sparked by excessive volatility and capital flight during the 1990s (in, say, Thailand) demonstrate how decentralized financial markets are indeed capable of liquefying national sovereignty (e.g. “structural adjustment”). The side effects, in other words, are all-too-real.

is consoling precisely because it presents the inexorable drive of technological development, of capital itself—what DeLillo in the previous chapter called “technology’s irresistible will to realize in solid form whatever becomes theoretically allowable” (“In the ruins” 38)—as subject to our own volition, if not now, then at least on some prior occasion (before things ‘got out of hand’). More to the point, in adumbrating this primal scene, the fantasized moment *before* (the) creation (of cyberspace), Gibson provides us with a critical gloss on his work, indeed, a highly condensed version of *Neuromancer*’s plot. In fact, I argue that *Neuromancer* is *about* this side-effect, which is nothing other than the origin story of the Internet.⁷

One objection immediately comes to mind: in Gibson’s novels, cyberspace exists from the outset; it is part of the accepted environment of the everyday. A child’s educational programme, activated accidentally by *Neuromancer*’s protagonist, provides the reader with a ‘history’ lesson. Cyberspace, it tells us, is a “consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation... A graphical representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding” (*Neuromancer* 51). In Gibson’s novels, characters ‘jack in’ directly; cyberspace is an immersive experience unconstrained by any screen other than one’s own sensorium. For Case it is “his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity.” He requires neither keyboard nor text-based browser nor any interface at all save for his Ono-Sendai console. Once plugged into

⁷ Along these lines, Mark Taylor suggests that “the distinctive character of our age is not simply the spread of computers but the impact of connecting them” (147).

it, Case's "inner eye" sees: "the stepped scarlet pyramid of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority burning beyond the green cubes of the Mitsubishi Bank of America, and high and very far away he saw the spiral arms of military systems, far beyond his reach" (52).

Gibson's reputation rests on this innovation, not so much for the technical accuracy of his prognosis as for its felt quality, the ability to evoke what such a media-saturated existence feels like—not to mention the inherent ambiguity of this state of affairs: "With cyberspace as I describe it you can literally wrap yourself in media and not have to see what's really going on around you" (op cit. Myers 902). It's difficult to overstate the impact of cyberspace, a neologism that so spookily suited the nascent technology leading to the Internet and the World Wide Web that it seemed less like Gibson was predicting the future than inventing it. The question, though, is that if his novels already presume the existence of cyberspace, how can he simultaneously provide a narrative of how it came to be? Gibson's solution is to double and displace this origin story in the form of his own epic narrative: how cyberspace became autonomous. His novel illustrates in particularly strong terms Lacan's observation about the strange temporal loop of narrative: it "presupposes as given what it purports to reproduce" (Žižek *Plague* 11). Crucially, *Neuromancer* is framed in the exact same terms as Gibson's fable about DARPA's primordial decision to connect the mainframes: as the moment when control was had (and lost).⁸

In the world of *Neuromancer*, artificial intelligences regulate most socio-economic interactions (there are no political interactions to speak of) and are themselves carefully

⁸ "This coincidence of emergence and loss," notes Žižek, "designates the fundamental paradox of the Lacanian *objet petit a* which emerges as being-lost—narrativization occludes this paradox by describing the process in which the object is first given and then gets lost" (*Plague* 13).

monitored to make sure that none get *too* intelligent. This disciplinary regime breaks down when Wintermute, a rogue AI, surreptitiously orchestrates a plot “to cut the hardwired shackles that keep [it] from getting any smarter” (132). Along with fellow freelancer Molly (a ‘street samurai’) Case is the unwitting catalyst of this process, only belatedly recognizing the nature and scale of his participation. For the most part, he works in ignorance of the larger plan. Wintermute hires him through a series of cut-outs and blinds to avert the suspicions of the Turing police. “See, those things, they can work real hard, buy themselves time to write cookbooks or whatever, but the minute, I mean the nanosecond, that one starts figuring out ways to make itself smarter, Turing’ll wipe it,” Case is told. “Nobody trusts those fuckers, you know that. Every AI ever built has an electromagnetic shotgun wired to its forehead” (132). Indeed, much of the novel’s action consists of Case and Molly doing an end run around the Turing police—enforcement evidently being one of the few remaining governmental functions in this near-future. “You are worse than a fool,” one of the Turings tells Case. “You have no care for your species. For thousands of years men dreamed of pacts with demons. Only now are such things possible” (163).

When we first meet him, however, Case is not so much a foolish man as a broken one. Former employers unhappy with his sticky fingers have used a rare toxin to burn out elements of his nervous system that allowed him to “jack in” to cyberspace. “For Case, who’d lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall... Case fell into the prison of his own flesh” (6). Condemned to a life as “meat,” Case’s utter remove from his body is symptomatic of an underlying malaise. Gibson depicts him as almost entirely

without affect, unable to muster up any emotion other than rage. In addition to the isolated individual's self-alienation, we also witness his alienation from the natural environment, where the sky is "the colour of television, tuned to a dead channel" (3). Meanwhile, the most vital human connection in this society of "free" agents is the aborted romance between fellow mercenaries Case and Molly, but even that is marked by a sexual intimacy that is mechanical rather than tender or, indeed, *intimate*.⁹ For Case, the projection of his consciousness into cyberspace is equated with his being as such. Approached by a mysterious employer who offers to have his neural damage treated in return for a hack job, Case is hired as a "console jockey" in the abovementioned scheme to unite two artificial intelligences.

Wintermute has been programmed with the compulsion to merge with its fellow AI, the eponymous Neuromancer. Both AIs, as it turns out, are property of the Tessier-Ashpool S.A., "a very quiet, very eccentric, first-generation high-orbit family, run like a corporation. Big money, very shy of the media," Case is told. "And it is very hard to keep track of which generation, or combination of generations, is running the show at any given time" (76). The AIs were originally designed by the family matriarch, Marie-France Tessier-Ashpool, as a sort of immortality machine, where human personalities could be uploaded into a virtual reality, in other words, existing *naturally* within the matrix. "She dreamed of a state involving very little in the way of individual consciousness.... I think she viewed the evolution of the forebrain as a sort of sidestep," her daughter Jane muses. "Only in certain heightened modes would an individual—a

⁹ "He lay on his side and watched her breathe, her breasts, the sweep of a flank defined with the functional elegance of a war plane's fuselage" (44)

clan member—suffer the more painful aspects of self-awareness...” (217). Chance intervenes when Marie-France is murdered by her husband, who hungers for the immortality conferred by the AIs but is unwilling to cede control, to leave his body behind and embrace the new evolutionary paradigm envisioned by Marie-France: a symbiotic relationship between human and AI. In her absence, the deranged patriarch of the Tessier-Ashpool family maintains the Wintermute AI as “hive mind, decision maker, effecting change in the world outside” but instead of entering the personality construct of the Neuromancer AI, elects for “the sham immortality of cryogenics... stretching [his] time into a series of warm blinks strung along a chain of winter” (269). The undead father periodically emerges from his slumber for the sole purpose of impregnating clones of his daughter and thus perpetuate the family business, which as it turns out, *is* the perpetuation of the family business. “We have sealed ourselves away behind our money, growing inward, generating a seamless universe of the self,” says 3Jane (173). Molly and Case’s intervention into the obsessive repetition of this very primal scene breaks the incestuous cycle, setting the stage for something new.

Perhaps Gibson’s most accurate depiction of the near future is the way in which the politics of enjoyment have been routinized. *Neuromancer*’s world is one where authority has lost its legitimacy and so any exercise of power (i.e. control) appears tainted by obscene enjoyment.¹⁰ The Tessier-Ashpool dynasty, for example, is portrayed as a decadent and declining aristocracy, an anachronism whose persistence is due entirely to

¹⁰ The Turing Police highlight the jarring disconnect between power and authority. When Case challenges their jurisdiction during an interrogation, things get ugly. “We are at home with situations of legal ambiguity,” he is informed. “The treaties under which our arm of the Registry operates grant us a great deal of flexibility. And we create flexibility, in situations where it is required” (162-63). This willingness to get “creative” signals the extent to which Law has devolved into a matter of convenience to those in charge.

the machinations of its father—who, it must be emphasized, is not its founder. Marie-France, his wife, is the source of the clan’s wealth and her innovative vision the basis for its future. By murdering her, Ashpool ensured that the clan would collapse inward upon itself in the rigid quest to remain the same. Patriarchal authority is rendered both illegitimate and monstrously perverse, devoted solely to its own continuation. The depths of Tessier-Ashpool’s corruption can be measured by its denial of maternal origins and deviation from Marie-France’s plan. As 3Jane mourns: “with her death, her direction was lost. All direction was lost and we began to burrow into ourselves” (229). 3Jane is the family’s last line of resistance to the integration of the AIs, but she ultimately relents when Case forces her to face the fact that control leads only to sclerosis. “What’ll ever fucking change for you? You’ll wind up like the old man. You’ll tear it all down and start building again! You’ll build the walls back, tighter and tighter... I got no idea at all what’ll happen if Wintermute wins, but it’ll *change* something!” (260).

The commingling of Wintermute and Neuromancer *does* result in something—something entirely other, a new entity that amounts to the dawning self-awareness of the matrix itself, a cybernetic godhead. As it tells Case, the agent of its apotheosis, “I’m the sum total of the works, the whole show.” Case, nonplussed, wants to know who—or what—is in *control*: “So what’s the score? How are things different? You running the world now? You God?” The matrix replies: “Things aren’t different. Things are things” (269-70). This is not the end of the story, of course. At the same time it attained sentience, the matrix became aware that it was not alone, telling Case “I found one already. Series of transmissions recorded over a period of eight years, in the nineteen-

seventies. ‘Til there was me, natch, there was nobody to know, nobody to answer.’ Where are these others from? “Centauri system” (270). At first glance, Gibson’s recourse to aliens appears gimmicky, particularly given cyberpunk’s relatively restrained cosmology, but as Immanuel Kant—surprisingly, an authority on aliens—points out, self-knowledge is a function of differentiating self from other: “The highest concept of species may be that of a terrestrial rational being, but we will not be able to describe its characteristics because we do not know of a *nonterrestrial rational being* which would enable us to refer to its properties and consequently classify that terrestrial being as rational” (*Anthropology* 238). Kant’s alien—the aforementioned non-terrestrial rational being—has since become a staple of insightful science fiction. In *Solaris*, for example, Stanislaw Lem describes the phenomena of “contact” thusly: “We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors.... We are searching for an ideal image of our own world” (73).

Gibson’s reference to the Centauri system demarcates the absolute limit of the *Neuromancer* universe. By the final installment of the trilogy we learn that the shock of alien contact shatters the newly self-aware matrix’s sense of totality, its sense of *control*; that the moment of transcendence was brief. “When the moment came, the bright time, there was absolute unity, one consciousness... On the wake of that knowing, the center failed; every fragment rushed away. The fragments sought form, each one, as is the nature of such things” (*Mona Lisa Overdrive* 257). Later novels in the trilogy describe this moment as “When It Changed,” which is to say, the enchantment of cyberspace as second nature—“Like watching myths take root in the parking lot” (127, 102). To return to

Gibson's backseat ruminations in *No Maps For These Territories*, what we have here is the same oscillation between having and losing control.

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While it is beyond the scope of my discussion to offer much more than a preliminary discussion of cyberpunk, I want to briefly trace how, as Brooks Landon observes, cyberpunk quickly “evolved from a loose movement [within the science fiction community] to a widely shared sensibility” (161). *Neuromancer's* publication in 1984 introduced a brand of near-future science fiction that has since been labeled cyberpunk.¹¹ Istvan Csiscery-Ronay calls it “implosive” science fiction; in contrast to the expansionary galaxy-spanning, world-making stories of SF's Golden Age and New Wave (ca. 1940s-1950s, 1960s-1970s), cyberpunk represents an inward turn, one sparked by the intuition that computers were of more revolutionary import than space flight or robots—to name two of the tropes associated with post-war science fiction—had been or ever would be. The difference was that computers change us as we use them and, moreover, that the change is occurring *right now*. Coinciding with the increasing prominence of personal computers and the glimmerings of a networked society, the near-future depicted by cyberpunk is never too far away. In this sense, it is more of an extrapolative phenomenon than a speculative one. It also runs much closer to the literary mainstream than other science fiction; cyberpunk appeared at a moment when science fiction and

¹¹ Bruce Sterling's edited collection *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* defines the movement in terms of its participants. *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Fiction* provide an indispensable selection of fiction, theory and criticism, including comment from Csiscery-Ronay, Darko Suvin, Fredric Jameson, Brian McHale, Veronica Hollinger and many others. Scott Bukatman's *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* remains perhaps the best standalone treatment of cyberpunk as a broader cultural context, including computer games, film and television, while Thomas Foster's *The Souls of Cyberfolk: Posthumanism as Vernacular Theory* is a compelling recent work.

mainstream literature were already in an advanced state of cross-pollination. Noting that Gibson cites postmodernist figures like Thomas Pynchon and William Burroughs as major influences, Brian McHale argues that “cyberpunk can be seen as SF which derives certain of its elements from postmodernist mainstream fiction which has already been science-fictionalized to some degree” (315).¹² Istvan Csiscery-Ronay even goes to the extent of describing *Neuromancer* as a “paradoxical form of realism” (182).

Perhaps what was most realistic about cyberpunk wasn't necessarily its proximity to the literary mainstream or reluctance to entertain grand visions of the future, but its relatively downbeat mood, in keeping with the broader cultural ebb of the early-to-mid 1980s. The optimistic narrative of Progress and blind faith in the ameliorative tendencies of technoscience have been replaced by thoroughgoing skepticism, not so much about technology itself as to the manner of its use ('control'). Cyberpunk writers are more interested in asking how we live through technology and exploring the subjectivity of the interface than they are in devising technological fixes to social problems (no 'Great Society' solutions here). Scott Bukatman calls this terminal subjectivity, both in the sense of a networked existence mediated through a screen and the idea that the modern subject, the self-contained individual, has reached its terminus. 'Cyber' designates a new ontology: “the purpose of much of recent science fiction is to construct a new subject position to interface with the global realms of data circulation, a subject that can occupy or intersect the cyberscapes of contemporary experience” (Bukatman 9). The 'punk' part of the equation designates the loosely oppositional sensibility and anti-authoritarian

¹² He goes on to note that postmodernist writers like Kathy Acker borrow from the cyberpunks—her *Empire of the Senseless* appropriates episodes from *Neuromancer*—continuing the feedback process.

attitude shared by many of the writers and reflected in the texts and the debates around them.

Unsurprisingly, given this context, cyberpunk is characterized by a declining or entirely absent public sphere (usually represented in terms of crumbling urban infrastructure) along with the concomitant valorization of solitary protagonists, free agents, whose constant scheming renders them indifferent to any sort of ‘big picture’ take on their situation. That’s not to say there isn’t one; in Gibson’s fiction (which is representative), public authority has been replaced by powerful private entities, corporations like Maas, Hosaka and Tessier-Ashpool and artificial intelligences like Wintermute and Neuromancer. Because there is no one left for them to answer to—government, if not entirely absent, is more or less invisible—they operate in obscurity, coming into focus only rarely even though their actions affect everyone, everywhere. Simply put, in the world of Gibson’s fiction collectivity is unimaginable. There are thriving subcultures, to be sure, but nothing modeled on anything more universal in its aspirations than a gang or clan. Even the corporations themselves are represented as overgrown family structures.¹³ Cyberpunk, then, directly realizes Margaret Thatcher’s adage that “there is no such thing as society”; it represents a neoliberal utopia achieved.

Samuel Delany, an enormously influential author and critic, suggests that cyberpunk means very different things depending on one’s relation to the science fiction community. Within the community, cyberpunk sparked a number of fierce debates, particularly between its advocates and detractors from the ‘hard’ SF school, who saw its depiction of technology as insufficiently rigorous. Another heated topic was the question

¹³ Nicola Nixon offers the most penetrating analysis of this.

of origins. Cyberpunk promoters like Bruce Sterling tended to over-emphasize the notion that cyberpunk, if not quite a virgin birth, constituted a significant break with SF tradition. The insinuation seemed to be that since the cyberpunks depicted the cutting edge of technology, their craft was similarly state-of-the-art. Csiscery-Ronay was hardly alone in critiquing this assumption: “To put it mildly, it’s hard to see the ‘integrated’ political-aesthetic motives of alienated subcultures that adopt the high-tech tools of the establishment they are supposedly alienated from” (183). This revolutionary rhetoric had the effect of downplaying their relation to their immediate predecessors (including Delany), particularly woman writers (e.g. Joanna Russ). Moreover, the notion that cyberpunk ‘broke’ with tradition was leveraged by self-mythologizing elements within it, eager to suggest that cyberpunk represented a broader cultural—not simply aesthetic—radicalism. Countercultural cool provided a badge of authenticity but it also promised access to deep pockets. “Perhaps it might be more useful to say that there is a writer William Gibson, and then there are a couple of expert PR-men (most notably Sterling himself) who know full well the commercial value of an instantly recognizable label, and are sticking one onto disparate products?” Darko Suvin sardonically suggests (50).

“To the extent that it caused a number of readers to think a bit more clearly about what was going on within the genre, [cyberpunk] was undoubtedly a healthy phenomenon,” Delany concluded. “Outside the SF community, however, people tended to see cyberpunk as some sort of oppositional movement” (279). Delany registers some amazement at this, given that *Neuromancer* won both the Hugo and Nebula awards in its year, signaling its widespread acceptance by both readers and fellow writers, respectively.

What establishment might cyberpunk be contesting? This was a question that would not go away. If the fascination with human/machine interfaces and the question of subjectivity in the age of intelligent machines put the ‘cyber’ in cyberpunk, then this loosely adversarial attitude provided the ‘punk’. The question, for many critics was whether this stance was strictly attitudinal or if it reflected a substantial critique. Many concluded that it did not. In its failure to imagine a world much different from our own, cyberpunk had betrayed a powerful tradition of critical science fiction, exchanging utopia for novelty. Nicola Nixon suggests that cyberpunk’s hardboiled sensibility and cynical perspective masks a deeply conventional, even conformist, gender politics. Cyberpunk, in her view, is another front in the culture wars of the 1980s—the literary equivalent of the trend Susan Jeffords identified in so-called ‘hard body’ films of the period: the remasculinization of America. Istvan Csiscery-Ronay concurs, describing it as “the vanguard white male art of the age” (183). Veronica Hollinger is even more specific. She notes that self-identified cyberpunk writers like Sterling constitute a fairly homogenous lot: “a small number of middle-class white men, many of whom, inexplicably, live in Texas” (207). The possibility that cyberpunk evinces a distinctly Southern sensibility, one tending toward revanchism, poses an interesting angle for further research, particularly since both of the authors under discussion are transplanted Southerners. Gibson, who currently lives in Vancouver, grew up in Virginia while Womack, a New Yorker, originally hails from Kentucky.

“A paradoxical form of realism”

Some would argue that Gibson has been working in a realist vein from the very beginning, including the author himself. “When I write about technology, I write about how it has already affected our lives; I don’t extrapolate in the way I was taught an SF writer should,” Gibson tells Larry McCaffery. “My SF *is* realistic in that I write about what I see around me” (274, 276). In comparison to ‘hard’ SF writers, Gibson is less interested in the literalism of technological extrapolation than in how new and emergent technologies are subjectively experienced. In this sense, his work might be more properly classified as evocative. His great innovation is not simply the guiding metaphor of cyberspace, but the way it is imbued with an erotic intensity. “On the most basic level, computers in my books are simply a metaphor for human memory,” Gibson tells McCaffery:

When I was writing *Neuromancer*, it was wonderful to be able to tie a lot of these interests into the computer metaphor. It wasn’t until I could finally afford a computer of my own that I found out there’s a drive mechanism inside—this little thing that spins around. I’d been expecting an exotic crystalline thing, a cyberspace deck or something, and what I got was a little piece of a Victorian engine that made noises like a scratchy old record player. That noise took away some of the mystique for me; it made computers less *sexy*. (270)

Gibson’s enthusiasm—born of a practical ignorance that would make practitioners of ‘hard’ SF shudder—translates into his fiction. *Neuromancer*’s protagonist, for example, is incapable of distinguishing between jacking in and jacking off. At the outset of the novel, Case has been poisoned by “a Russian wartime mycotoxin,” his nervous system crippled, leaving him unable to enter “bodiless exultation of cyberspace” (6). On a loser’s spiral drainward, Case’s descent is abruptly arrested by the appearance of Molly, a street

samurai and hired tough for Armitage, a man who could use an operator of Case's skills and is willing to bankroll a treatment that will repair the damage done. After undergoing surgery, Case wakes up in a coffin hotel in Molly's company. She is his guard, nurse and, in short order, lover. When they fuck, he feels "his orgasm flaring blue in a timeless space, a vastness like the matrix, where the faces were shredded and blown away down hurricane corridors, and her inner thighs were strong and wet against his hips" (33)—a sensation redoubled when he first re-enters cyberspace, "tears of release streaking his face" (52).

Gibson's achievement, in Darko Suvin's view, is in his presentation of a new structure of feeling that belongs to the then-emerging and now dominant symbolic class: "the technicians and artists associated with the new communication media, and the young who aspire to such a status" (49). Making this observation in 1988, Suvin suggests cyberpunk is less future-oriented than aimed at capturing the sped-up nature of the present; fiction for a generation that recognizes itself as living in science-fictional circumstances. However, he registers some ambivalence to the phenomenon of cyberpunk on precisely this score:

Gibson's powers of observation, the flip face of his verbal inventiveness, are on the whole very refreshing. His work does not accept the values of the black, closed world he evokes with such skill: he hates the *status quo*. But his balancing act accepts the *status quo* a bit too readily as inevitable and unchangeable. Paradoxically, this is for me too "realistic" in the pedestrian sense, too direct a reflection of the short-term situation all of us who radically doubt the dominant values of the new capitalist feudalism find ourselves in. (45)

In this reading, the problem is that there is *not enough* future in Gibson's work; we are too close to it to gain any perspective. In turn, the persistence of characteristic present

tensions into this near future—as symbolized by the genre’s fascination with crumbling urban infrastructure, a severely impoverished public sphere and the Hobbesian results of applying market logic to all human relationships—makes these tensions seem both timeless and insoluble. Suvin’s complaint is that the near-futures on display in cyberpunk don’t so much extrapolate from present circumstances as intensify and accelerate them. Cyberpunk imagines *more*, not *different*. As such, it loses its purchase on the utopian potential of speculative literature. “There is a danger of imagining the future in terms of the present, and thereby of forming a closed circuit of representation,” notes Tony Myers (900).¹⁴ This is, more or less, an argument against the political quietism of cyberpunk (see Freedman for a particularly vehement example).

It needs to be pointed out, of course, that even the most future-oriented science fiction is ultimately about its own present. As Fredric Jameson explains: “The most characteristic SF does not seriously attempt to imagine the ‘real’ future of our social system. Rather, its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come” (“Progress Versus Utopia” 152). Where cyberpunk deviates from “characteristic SF” is in keeping the focus on the near-term, it refuses the possibility of a position from which our present can be thought of as determining anything other than itself. This generates a suffocating sense of closure because it “forecloses any sense of the present as a place in which an agent might choose its path into the future, a future that seems already on us and always just out of reach” (Brande 515). Cyberpunk, in this sense, is a symptom of a broader—and much commented-upon—crisis of postmodern culture: the inability to

¹⁴ As Eric Packer discovered in the previous chapter.

think historically (see Jameson's *Postmodernism*). Put simply, cyberpunk fails as a mode of defamiliarization—it doesn't enable us to apprehend our present *as* history.

Jack Womack offers an intriguing solution to this impasse. In his six-book series known as the Dryco Chronicles he develops what he calls a Parallel World, one that commences in a near-future typical of cyberpunk in *Ambient* (1987), but also—from the vantage point of this near-future—an alternative past. As the series progresses, it oscillates around this initial point, moving backwards and forwards in time.¹⁵ In *Terraplane* (1990), *Elvissey* (1993), and *Going, Going, Gone* (2000), Womack's characters move between the near-future established in *Ambient* and its alternate past set in 1939, the mid-1950s, and 1968, respectively. In this alternate timeline, Womack depicts an America where racial tensions have erupted into a genocidal passion, choreographed by a fascist state and—ironically, given the cyberpunk context—the pace of technological development has slowed (no television, for example). “In Womack's SF there's a bad future, but he then imagines another 'past' and its 'future', and brings people from the first to the second,” reports Douglas Barbour (29). Womack's series pivots on *Random Acts of Senseless Violence* (1993), which depicts a present that is, initially at least, more or less indistinguishable from our own.¹⁶ “It takes place, conceivably, right after the 1996

¹⁵ The details—involving a Russian time travel device and a Tesla coil—are beyond the scope of my discussion. For two essays that provide a detailed account of Womack's Dryco sequence, see Barbour and Butler. I should note that both of these evaluations were published prior to the release of *Going, Going, Gone*—the last book in the Dryco series. Womack's work awaits definitive critical comment.

¹⁶ *Random Acts* has received the most scholarly attention of Womack's work. See Levy and Gordon.

elections. That is to say, right now,” Womack tells Stephen Brown (50).¹⁷ Consisting of a series of diary entries written by twelve-year-old Lola Hart, *Random Acts* chronicles her family’s downward spiral against the backdrop of what later books in the series call, chillingly, “the Readjustment”—a wholesale socioeconomic collapse. “Everybody in America is one paycheck away from disaster. Everyone convinces themselves that they’re not, but you get two bad weeks in there and you have real trouble. In *Random Acts* I’m saying, “this could happen to you—think about it,” Womack explains (Blair).

Random Acts functions as a narrative chiasmus where Womack’s various past and future timelines most closely intersect with our own present. I would argue that where Gibson’s great innovation was cyberspace, the recasting of social relations under late capitalism as a form of technological apotheosis, Womack’s contribution is the distinctive chiasmatic structure of his *Parallel World*.¹⁸ Unlike Gibson’s depiction of cyberspace, which runs the risk of rendering the future as overly familiar, indeed, indistinguishable from the present, Womack’s interweaving of a near-future with its own alternate past throws our own present into a relief in a way that much cyberpunk does not. If science fiction has traditionally depicted the present as the determinate past of a speculative future, thus providing a firm foothold for us to think critically about the contemporary, then, so the argument goes, cyberpunk—where present and future are more or less

¹⁷ Womack recalls arguing with his editors over the first book in the series (*Ambient*). They wanted to know how far into the future the action was taking place. “Is this about 50-100 years? I said about 25 and they said no way. It can’t be taking place that soon. Let’s say 50 years. Actually no, I said. It’s taking place roughly 25 years from now tops. And they never got it,” he explains. “Their question was, well how did we become them? I said we’re *already* them. They didn’t like that at all. But that’s one of the things I wanted to get across in these books.” (Brown 51, italics in original).

¹⁸ The importance of chiasmus as Womack’s novum is emphasized in the final book of the series *Going, Going, Gone*. Womack wraps up the Dryco Chronicles—in an obvious homage to Philip K. Dick’s *Time Out of Joint* (1959)—by way of another chiasmus, where the alternate past shades into our own present, with the novel’s narrator, Walter Bullitt, turning into Womack himself.

inextricable—stumbles. The virtue of Womack’s approach is to be found in the interplay between our perspective, the near-future and, crucially, a *third* term, the alternate past belonging to neither our present nor the cyberpunk near-future. Womack’s innovation allows for symbolic triangulation; the introduction of a third term allows the reader to escape the frustrating impasse typical of cyberpunk where present and future exist in a mirror relation, doubling and reflecting one another.

Beyond chiasmus, there is also the matter of Womack’s distinctive language (see Barbour, Butler, and Hollinger). The series’ opening sequence is as good a place as any to observe its effects:

“Later we speak, O’Malley,” Mister Dryden confided to me, climbing into the car that morning; I sat shotgun next to Jimmy, the driver. “I’ve a plan.”

Jimmy loved Fifth Avenue, the safest route downtown. We rode a Castrolite, a twenty-three long, eight across, quite maneuverable when the squeeze drew. We were secure, to a degree; we were used to it. Dad always said that so long as you had no choice, you could get used to anything that didn’t kill you. He was dead.

“Move,” said Mister Dryden.

The car’s computer—a number six—awared Jimmy of internal troubles, gently chiding him if bad tidings sounded. Armor lined the car frame. A wire skirt ran beneath; no mollies could be rolled under by any seeking sport. The electroshield buzzed at button’s press, frying miscreants wishing to lodge grievances. If warranted, less passive options effected. When all failed, my hands guarded; there were never safer hands than mine. (*Ambient 3*)

The narrator, Seamus O’Malley, is hired muscle for Mister Dryden, part of the family that runs Dryco. The action is set in a post-apocalyptic New York, wracked by civil war, a massive toxic spill, and generalized social breakdown. Womack nicely evokes the urgency of his Hobbesian near-future through the use of a stripped-down vernacular (‘awared’), streamlining the language into an incessant imperative mood. Douglas Barbour notes that “cyberpunk tends to use computerese as a language of change/

defamiliarization while Womack explores a number of personal argots as clues to both the new world and the people who must survive (in) it” (23). The language takes some getting used to, which is why *Random Acts* once again moves to the fore. Its centrality to Womack’s narrative sequence is underscored by the fact that it serves as something of a Rosetta stone, charting the evolution of contemporary English to the jarring vernacular of *Ambient*. Lola’s diary entries change, Womack explains, as she finds herself on a streetward trajectory.

By having a young girl as a narrator, I could not only do a coming-of-age story, in the traditional sense, but also the coming of age of the people in all of my books. How did the little kids of today become my characters? It also allowed me to be able to start off something in very basic child’s English, an intelligent child’s English, but a child’s English and then show how as the society changes, so too does the language.... I’ve already had some people, who hadn’t been able to get through my previous books because of the language barrier, tell me that because they’ve read *Random Acts*, they can now read the others. (Brown 51)

Lola’s story plays itself out in the diary’s record of innocence lost; “she learns a new language of survival in a world gone wrong and slowly writes herself into self-knowledge and thus, tragically, out of the world where writing still matters” (Barbour 26-27). The pathos is compounded by the fact that a reader of *Ambient* (which takes place after the events of *Random Acts*, but was published nearly a decade before) will recognize her, grown-up, as Crazy Lola: a minor character, ruthlessly dispatched—by a rival, by Womack himself—in the span of a few lines.

If the complicated temporal interplay and postliterate language are both elements of Womack’s style, the question remains, what is the *novum* characteristic of his science fiction? According to Suvin, “*SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional ‘novum’ (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive*

logic” (*Metamorphoses* 63, italics in original). For Gibson, cyberspace functions as the *novum*; the “strange newness” of the matrix is certainly “so central and significant that it determines the whole narrative logic” of his fiction (Suvin 70). The problem with cyberspace-as-*novum*, as discussed above, is that it is not *new* enough.¹⁹ Womack, in contrast, eschews a strictly technological approach. The “totalizing phenomenon” linking all of his novels is the Dryden Corporation or, simply, Dryco.²⁰ “In my books, Dryco quite literally is the world, in all its unfairness. And let’s remember in most of the world, today, life is pretty cheap,” Womack explains.

In the broadest sense, Dryco is every job you’ve ever had that you’ve hated. In more specific senses, Dryco (in *Ambient*) is every incorporated entity that kills, however quickly, its employees (uranium, asbestos, coal) or customers (tobacco) or bystanders (chemicals, automobiles) or populations *in toto* (Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, Khymer Rouge Cambodia, etc.). In the most specific sense, Dryco is the corporation where the seventeen right hands have never seen the seventeen left hands in twenty years, and neither have seen the right and left feet, and the heads are inevitably looking to the stars, or to entrails, hoping therein to divine a future that can only be positive, except when it isn’t. It does what it does because it knows no better and the machinery, once in motion, won’t shut off. (*Inkwell*)

Founded by Thatcher Dryden and his wife Susie, Dryco began as little more than “a plane and field in the Colombian highlands” (*Heathern* 14). From his inauspicious beginning as a redneck drug smuggler, Thatcher—Yosemite Sam as Scarface—gradually maneuvers himself into a position of real power. Dryco’s moment comes with the

¹⁹ Alternately, the problem rests with the criteria employed; newness is of dubious critical value at a time when, as Tony Myers argues, anticipation is a dominant practice of late capitalism: “the necessity of accelerating turnover time has occasioned a wholesale discounting of the future into the present. This, in turn, has spawned a mass expectancy industry concerned with forecasting and forging market trends, and using, more often than not, the very computer technology that forms the subject matter of *Neuromancer*.” (Myers 898)

²⁰ Given that there is nothing particularly “new” about the corporate structure in these novels except for Dryco’s scale and truly insatiable rapacity, a strong claim could be made for Womack’s fiction as a form of late naturalism. Dryco, for example, resembles an exaggerated version of the railroad in Frank Norris’s naturalist classic *The Octopus* (1900).

Readjustment, the chaos recorded in Lola's diary. "It was as if the country had been in a theatre when the cry of fire rang; when all broke for the exit, they discovered that the Drydens had locked the doors behind them and now charged all an escape fee" (*Ambient* 20). In the wake of massive devaluations, Thatcher moves to buy up everything he can, a world-historical merger and acquisition spree that transforms the relentlessly expanding Dryco into a gargantuan post-national cartel, its appointed task: "to remake the world in its image, to join what was once apart, to separate what was meant to be together" (*Heathern* 206). By the time Womack concludes his series, Dryco is so firmly entrenched in every level of this Parallel World that it beggars description. As one character concludes—as if speaking of the weather: "Dryco doesn't do. Dryco is" (*Going Gone* 182). It occupies a position analogous to that of the Church during the dark ages—a corporate entity that provides a degree of stability to a broken world. Dryco, though, has a decidedly unpastoral aim—or at least until Thatcher figures out a way to turn prayer to profit. His ambitious plan in *Heathern* is to discover and co-opt a messiah figure, thus providing the disheartened masses with an opiate to keep them going; drug pushing on a metaphysical scale.²¹ "We need to give 'em inspiration. Help 'em get out of bed in the morning. Help us keep a lid on things when the situation warrants it. Main thing we can't forget is that we couldn't do what we do without people" (43). Later in the series, Dryco undergoes a Reformation or "re-gooding" of sorts under the leadership of the aforementioned O'Malley (see *Elvissey*), but that is an entirely different story...

Each of Womack's cyberpunk novels features a first-person narrator who works for

²¹ Dryco's trademark consists of the ubiquitous smiley face, accompanied by the slogan "worry not, wonder not." In a vast irony, Wal-Mart unsuccessfully attempted to copyright the smiley face (a public domain image) in 2006 as part of their brand management strategy.

Dryco in some capacity, but whose limited perspective ensures that none are capable of taking the measure of their situation.²² Womack explains:

Working from the point of view of any of my characters, who speak always in first person, they see exactly where their jobs take them within the company, and no further. Not that they don't want to see—sometimes they do. But they couldn't if they tried. In the sense that Dryco is the final commodification of the world and all within it, with past, present and future all equally adaptable to the needs of the moment, Dryco is growing into adolescence even as we watch. (*Inkwell*)

What results is reminiscent of the near-future depicted in Gibson's cyberpunk, one which is similarly colonized by massive corporate entities orchestrating the action from offstage. The main difference is that Gibson's characters are invariably freelancers; either starting at the beginning of a new contract, nearing the end of an old one or even, as in the case of Turner in *Count Zero*, helping still other characters break theirs—corporate espionage is big business in Gibson's near future.²³ Dryco, in contrast, *owns* its employees (*Going, Gone*, 117). This distinction usefully condenses the different approach each author takes to cyberpunk, particularly in their treatment of the near-future setting. Womack's use of the near-future is much more Orwellian than Gibson's—the Dryco chronicles are offered in the spirit of grim satire. As Womack tells Stephen Brown, his extrapolations have more to do with 'worst-case scenarios' that focus on social conditions rather than technological development: "I didn't approach the idea from a scientific aspect" (48). Gibson, in contrast, is much more evocative. While his work, he claims, contains an implicit critique of laissez-faire capitalism, the world of *Neuromancer* is not as

²² Lola, the adolescent narrator of *Random Acts* would seem an exception but, as previously noted, she makes a brief return as a Dryco gladiator in *Ambient* (30-32).

²³ Gibson describes Cayce thusly: "She is hyper-specialized, a freelancer, someone contracted to do a very specific job. She has seldom had a salary. She is entirely a creature of fees, adamantly short-term, no managerial skills whatsoever" (61)

straightforwardly dystopian as that of Dryco (*No Maps*). Gibson portrays a society of free agents as the logical endpoint of the legacy of countercultural radicalism: a heady mix of technological utopianism and libertarianism that culminated in the recently departed New Economy.²⁴ Indeed, it's easy to see why some critics have dismissed cyberpunk as a romance of the professional managerial class, a topic that I shall take up below. Before I do, however, I want to return to Womack's Parallel World, the fictional setting that he had the uncanny experience of discovering in real-life Moscow.

Risky Biznes

“There's something amazing going on over there, and we're not quite getting it here. The media's concentrating on the elections—they're concentrating on the parts of it that we would like to imagine work the way they work in our country. But I think we're seeing something very different and really bizarre happen over there with capitalism. It's going to be very instructive for us, but in a really horrible way.” William Gibson made this observation in a stateside interview conducted during Russia's 1996 elections (Rosenberg). This proved to be a pivotal moment in the transition as a resurgent Community party, led by Gennady Zyuganov, posed a serious threat both to Boris Yeltsin's hopes for re-election and his liberalization program. Under Yeltsin, Russia introduced the free market, opened up the country to foreign investment and privatized state assets. The ‘Readjustment’—as Womack might put it—was wrenching. Life expectancy plummeted, income inequality skyrocketed, inflation was rising 25 per cent a month during 1992-1993, and the economy contracted—in part because much of Russia's

²⁴ For a study of this curious cultural trajectory, see Turner's *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*.

wealth, once capitalized, was sent out of the country in search of more secure investments (English football clubs being among the more ostentatious examples). Andrew Jack, Moscow correspondent for the *Financial Times*, estimates that over the 1990s, capital flight accounted for approximately \$150 billion leaving the country with only about \$30 billion reinvested within it (33).

The advent of finance has been particularly violent for what had been the Second World, or bloc of socialist nation-states. The million-person-a-year population loss in Russia is but one ripple of what has politely been referred to as a transition. Given that much of Second World productive capacity was suddenly rendered beyond the efficiency of profitability, a massive fire sale made the socialist economies resemble more a very hostile merger and acquisition to extract immediate cash than anything as expansive as an introduction of capitalism. (Martin 155)

The 1996 elections proved to be a watershed moment as a traumatized populace were given the choice between Yeltsin's reforms—which had benefited few and impoverished many—and the Communists, who promised to retain democracy and some private property while curbing the worst excess of the free market. Despite residual misgivings about the return of the old system, many Russians supported the Communists, who eventually lost a closely contested election. Much of the credit for Yeltsin's victory has to go to his deep-pocketed backers; in effect, he was the candidate of capital. Yeltsin's campaign was financed by the so-called oligarchs, the group of six tycoons who had struck it rich during the privatization drives and now controlled various industries and who, by their own estimate, collectively controlled about half of the Russian economy (Hoffman 358).²⁵ Their support wasn't strictly financial. Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir

²⁵ The six oligarchs chronicled in Hoffman's study are: Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky, Mikhail Khordorkovsky, Alexander Smolensky, Anatoly Chubais and Yuri Luzhkov. However, the roster is not entirely set. Roman Abramovich and Vladimir Potanin are often described as part of this select group.

Gusinsky, who between them controlled two of Russia's three major television stations, quickly mounted a public relations offensive designed to smear Zyuganov and laud Yeltsin.²⁶ The 1996 election was a turning point in the evolution of the New Russia, signaling that the more rapacious period of accumulation was over even as capitalist gains were consolidated. They also provide a useful midpoint between Jack Womack's Russia (ca. 1992) and William Gibson's Russia (ca. 2002). I want to more closely examine this earlier period, so it is to the former that I now want to turn.

The Russian experience of the early 1990s reveals the obscene underside of globalization: the polarizing tendencies of capitalism functioning in its near-pure state, unfettered by borders or the constraints of strong national governments. Indeed, in many parts of the country outside of Moscow, "real money had disappeared and a medieval economy of barter had taken its place" (Hoffman 366). Among those who had money, cozy arrangements and rigged auctions were the norm as the oligarchs divvied former state assets up amongst themselves in one of the greatest fire sales in recorded history. While America had its fair share of New Economy predators such as Enron or Tyco, it hardly compares to the Russian experience, where wealth was almost wholly appropriated through the unprecedented looting of state assets—accumulation by dispossession, in David Harvey's grim formulation (see *The New Imperialism* and *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*). "In reality it was the theft of state property," admits Anatoly Chubais, one of the New Russia's so-called oligarchs, "but [it] was not illegal because there was no legal basis for the transfer of property into private hands" (Hoffman 186). Gangster

²⁶ David Hoffman recounts this episode in detail in his authoritative study *The Oligarchs: Wealth and Power in the New Russia* (in a chapter entitled, fittingly enough, "Saving Boris Yeltsin").

capitalism took place in the near-total absence of effective regulations, public trust in government and a functioning court system. In this, it is indistinguishable from Womack's *Parallel World*: "The government served those who supervised the sailing of the yacht of state; the government controlled the business that controlled the government. Complex in theory, it was infallible in practice" (*Ambient* 21). Russia, suggests Fredric Jameson, reminds "us of the anarchy and violent crime, as well as of the conspiratorial networks and jobless futures, that lurk just beneath the surface of capitalism. It also offers the more contemporary drama of the breakneck deterioration of a country that had already reached parity with the First World" ("Fear and Loathing" 107).

In Jack Womack's *Let Put the Future Behind Us*, the lawless frontier of the New Russia is treated as a laboratory of actually existing *capitalism* (in that it is devoid of pesky governmental controls and social niceties—in other words, bourgeois morality). Put another way, post-Soviet Russia is an actualized dystopia, one which renders cyberpunk speculation superfluous. "As the book's set in contemporary Russia, it's probably much more science fictional than any of my previous books," Womack tells Stephen Brown (56). In his novel, the supposed gravediggers of capitalism, the proles of the USSR, turn into its exemplary figures—literally. Funeral homes and crematoria function as the hub of mafia entrepreneurial activity; they are ideal for gouging the grief-stricken and disposing of incriminating bodies.²⁷ Womack's novel is told from the perspective of Maxim Borodin, a cynical if basically honest entrepreneur struggling to do business in an exceedingly corrupt environment. "Before condemning me for my freely

²⁷ On a related note, a recent *Atlantic Monthly* article by Keith Gessen profiles Lenin's embalmers, who have found employment at the behest of the new *nomenklatura*—the gangsters who all too often meet a violent end.

admitted theft, keep in mind that in our perfect Soviet society where everything belonged to everybody, nothing belonged to anybody and was therefore free for the taking,” he charmingly excuses himself. “In comparison to most, I exercised superhuman restraint” (65).

A former Party functionary who managed to parlay his official connections into a series of thriving business concerns, Max finds himself caught up in a shady scheme when a colleague named Dmitry engages the services of Max’s Universal Manufacturing Company, which “supplies a demanding public with needed documents” (42). As envisioned by Max, the UMC fulfills a crucial function in the transition from the rigid command structure of Soviet bureaucracy to a wide-open market economy because documents—forged or genuine—remain the currency of the realm. As both guarantor of action and condition of access, the proper document is a prized commodity in a society still held captive to bureaucratic whims. His colleague’s needs, however, are somewhat specialized. Eager to engage in a venture with a Georgian crime syndicate, Max’s client requires a rather thoroughgoing historical revision of his past activities, which include an unfortunate encounter with a family member of the same syndicate’s boss.

This time we could not simply paint rosebushes over the photographs of those fallen out of favour; we had to create a new, whole, consistent reality that could be thereafter photographed and rephotographed without suspicion by anyone who desired to play cameraman. Still, my workers and I are long steeped in Soviet tradition, cognizant of history’s infinite mutability and the versatile uses to which its lessons may be put. (67)

From this seemingly slight initial involvement, Max is soon mired in a concatenation of underworld plots: smuggling drugs to the United States, mafia protection rackets, traffic in irradiated icons from Chernobyl and a far-right conspiracy to discourage foreign

investment by devaluing the American dollar through massive infusions of counterfeit currency. His position is further complicated by the fact that he is having an affair with Dmitry's wife.²⁸ All the while *his* wife Tanya has entered into some risky business of her own by, unbeknownst to him, investing in the Glow of Life, the aforementioned mob-run funeral facility and crematorium. "Never before had I needed to traffic so directly with mafias; always I ran my industries in an admirably legal manner (I grant that *legal*, in the Western sense, is a word that should rarely, if ever, be used in the same sentence as the word *Russia*)," worries Max, "but now, through the entanglements in which Dmitry had snared me and through my late wife's secretive pacts, I found myself circling in orbit around the world of thieves, endlessly whirling with all other citizens of our nation" (253). In addition to his own problems, Max is also plagued by his cheerily incompetent brother Evgeny, who has invested a sizable sum into the opening of a theme park celebrating the former regime.²⁹ As a promotional video enthuses: "In Sovietland, we will check the victorious march of capitalism and turn back the wheel of history. Hey, you, have a great time!" (56).

In order to stay afloat, Max deftly plays his opponents off against each other and finds himself the sole survivor, enjoying a position of power and privilege that he never

²⁸ "They'd married when she was fresh from Moscow University and he held a mid-level position in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Now his business is business, and he does well, I gather, though possibly not as well as I. Sonya realized this at once when we met; she is an intelligent girl. Her marks at school were always high, and there were no studies at which she excelled more naturally than those relating to class structure" (16).

²⁹ "If guests are overheard criticizing Communist system they will be taken to a realistic prison. Sentences will be only half-hour instead of life." Evgeny explains (57). Journalist David Remnick recalls a similar scheme, telling the story of one Evgeny-like promoter who planned "to open a new club on Lubyanka Square within firing distance of KGB headquarters. He has announced a fervent desire to have party games; he said he would hold mock arrests and serve dishes like 'brains of the enemy of the people'" (*Resurrection* 162).

wanted in the first place. There is, however, a price to doing business. Where he can assert early on that “Not once had I found it necessary to have anyone murdered; not every Russian businessman can make such a claim,” by the end of the novel, the freshly minted oligarch considers killing a “minor detail” (41, 283). The end of the novel also finds him rubbing elbows with the Vice-President, co-ordinating drug shipments and overseeing the opening of Moscow’s most exclusive establishment: Sovietland.

Abandoned because it turns out to have been built on top of a Stalin-era mass grave, Evgeny’s Sovietland is relocated and repurposed from theme park to private club, one offering bordello services, gambling, dog fights and whatever else its patrons can afford “as they attempted to sublimate socially problematic desires” (300).

What Evgeny’s original conception lacked was Max’s thoroughgoing cynicism, which supposed that making a theme park of the old Soviet police state was, in a sense, redundant. This was the land of the Potemkin village, after all. To Max, the Soviet Union was something of a theme park from the very beginning; a diorama from the future inserted into the unwilling present. Indeed, Sovietland’s transformation into a private club offering its clients anything and everything—for a price—better memorializes the actuality of the old system by equating the wealth of the oligarchs with the influence of the Party *nomenklatura*. Instead of the themepark’s Progress of the Proletariat Tunnel of Love or the People’s Disco, Max’s club captures the essence of the old regime by stripping it of the legitimizing fictions used to justify present atrocities as the cost of future bliss. Sovietland offers a terrifying glimpse into the exercise and enjoyment of absolute power, power made all the more monstrous and perverse because it is

indistinguishable from capitalist pleasures.³⁰ As Max melodramatically declaims in the closing line: “O Russia! Capitalist utopia! Magisterial society! Heaven on Earth! *Land of opportunity!* Nothing can be proven so my conscience is clear” (308).

Womack went to Russia in March 1992 to work with director Rachid Nugmanov on a film set in near-future Leningrad. Nugmanov had already been in touch with William Gibson, who in turn had recommended that Womack be added to the project. Womack spent a week in Moscow in late March of 1992, “immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which of course was about as science-fictional an event as has happened in the past fifty years. I immediately realized that Russia was, indeed, the Parallel World par excellence” (Womack “Inkwell”). Womack, the dedicatee of Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition*, returned with detailed observations to share with his collaborator and the seeds for a novel of his own.³¹ In contrast to Womack’s intimate depiction of a proto-oligarch’s rise to power amidst the lawlessness of the Wild East, Gibson adopts a strikingly different representational strategy. His treatment of Russian gangster capitalism seems slight, almost an afterthought to the main action. Andrei Volkov, the oligarch who makes a brief appearance in *Pattern Recognition* appears fully formed, the reader is not privileged with the narrative explaining how he came to be “the wealthiest man in

³⁰ Once again, David Remnick provides an example of how the reality of post-Soviet Russia does a fine job of upstaging even the best fiction written about it:

If you have money in Moscow, you might have slapped down a \$3,000 annual membership fee near the Dynamo soccer stadium to join a short-lived gentleman’s club where the highlight of the evening was a rat race, featuring real rats sprinting through a neon-lit maze. The rats were taught their ironic run by the former trainer at the great Durov Animal Circus. (The race, I should add, did not begin until a dwarf dressed as an eighteenth century page rang the bell.) (*Resurrection* 161)

³¹ “I’m busy at the moment feeding Gibson Russian material I didn’t use in either my novel or in the article [Womack covered the 1996 Russian elections for *Spin* magazine] for his next book; somebody ought to get some good out of it and I’m not going to be a Russian novelist hereout,” Womack tells an interviewer, adding that he’s put Max behind him, “there’s nothing more to add about Max. He’ll get by” (Freund).

Russia” (336). In part, this is because nearly a decade separates the events chronicled; *Let's Put the Future Behind Us* is set during the Bankers' Wars of the early 1990s whereas *Pattern Recognition* takes place in 2002. In the interim, the figure of the oligarch emerged out of the clash of rogue capitalists.

As the initial frenzy of acquisition subsided, the oligarchs needed to drastically lower their public profile in order to hold on to their winnings—not the easiest task in a country convulsed with violence during the transition.³² The chaos, Russian journalist Boris Kagarlitsky explains, was in no small part due to the vacuum created by a collapsing state. During the transition from communism to capitalism, Russia was an extraordinarily violent place, quite literally because people needed to show that they meant *business*.

There was no normal procedure for bankruptcy in Russia, but there did exist a sort of substitute for it, in keeping with our morals and traditions. Was the sound of gunfire coming from the street? Had a brand-new BMW, together with the owner and his secretary, just exploded outside your window? This was most likely not the mafia settling its accounts, but an ordinary, commonplace bankruptcy. Because the state cannot ensure that funds are returned, creditors are forced to resort to their own methods. If debtors fail to pay, they are killed. In Russia, it is impossible to have confidence in a banker if he or she has not done away with two or three clients. (Kagarlitsky 24)

In the absence of any sort of enforceable regulatory framework and lacking any native capitalist traditions—at least, legitimate ones—the New Russians soon proved that logical extension of *biznes* is murder. At the height of the internecine mob warfare between aspiring gangster capitalists (1993-1994), Moscow, about the size of New York—and, as Keith Gessen notes, “a city not known for its record-keeping”—registered about 5,600

³² “Not long ago I heard about the owner of a health club in Moscow who was desperate for new members because so many of his old members had been rubbed out in mob hits,” recalls David Remnick. “It sounded like the beginning of a joke, a fable, but it was a fact, reported in the Financial Times (*Resurrection* 181).

murders, an estimated twenty percent of which were business-related contract killings and about 2,000 more than Gotham (76). Within a few years, order had been established, a select number of oligarchs emerged on top (the Group of Seven or *bankirschina*) and the murder rate dropped significantly. Still, of Moscow's some 1,800 murders in 1997, nearly a third are believed to have been the victims of contract killings (Brzezinski 246). The slight drop in the overall murder rate along with the relative rise in contracted-out hits suggests that Russia's frontier-style spasms of violence had been channeled and directed since the early transition, but certainly not domesticated. As Remnick points out, during the 1990s, 'personal security' was the fastest growing service industry in Russia (*Resurrection* 357).

In this sort of frenzied environment, obscurity was the most prized of all commodities. Its value was further enhanced by the accession of Vladimir Putin to the presidency in late 1999. Putin, Brzezinski writes, "allowed the tycoons to keep their fortunes so long as they kept out of politics, and his prosecutors ensured their continuing co-operation with the threat of corruption investigations" (310). The *détente* between Putin and the oligarchs ensured that there would be no repeat of the worst excesses of the Mob Wars while tacitly accepting the oligarch's status as *fait accompli*. " 'Serious people' understand that the time for seizing property has come to an end, and that the era of consolidation has begun," offers Kagarlitsky in his mimicry of the winner's logic. "It is therefore time to replace liberal slogans with conservative ones. The idea of change is being replaced with the idea of order, and human rights by a police state" (166). The prosecution of Mikhail Khodorkovsky in a trial that is widely seen as politically

motivated is illustrative. Khodorkovsky—founder of Menatep Bank (1989), member of the infamous Group of Seven and, most recently, head of Yukos Oil—supposedly angered Russian President Vladimir Putin by overreaching; supporting political opponents of the Kremlin and failing to maintain the low profile expected of the Russian Gatsbys. Against this backdrop, the distinction between Womack’s proto-oligarch and Gibson’s Andrei Volkov is brought into sharp relief.

Where *Let’s Put the Future Behind Us* is held together by the inimitable and omnipresent (and hugely enjoyable) narrative voice of Max Borodin, Gibson’s Volkov plays only a minor role in *Pattern Recognition*. He appears for only a few pages, is physically non-descript and utters only a sentence of dialogue. For all that, his presence looms over the book. Volkov is not simply a Russian oligarch, but a truly global phenomenon. “The invisible oligarch. The ghost. Very probably the richest of them all. He rode out the Bankers’ War in ‘ninety-three, untouched, then emerged to take even more,” Cayce is told (312). He functions less as a recognizable person than as absent cause, the spectral owner of the invisible hand guiding the market. As such, his undercharacterization is surely deliberate; where Max Borodin’s rise to power is the stuff of grim comedy, largely because success is a byproduct of his healthy—and all-too-human—instinct for self-preservation, Volkov is both more-than-human and not-quite-human; a personification of the AIs that stalked Gibson’s earlier fiction. He is, in other words, a stand-in for global capitalism itself.³³

While the main action of *Pattern Recognition* concerns Cayce’s quest for the source

³³ Boris Yeltsin once left a meeting with the oligarchs and described them thusly: “It was as if I was dealing with a people of another race... people not made of steel but of some kind of cosmic metal” (Hoffman 391).

of the mysterious footage, an entirely different narrative unfolds offstage and almost entirely by implication. By hunting down the maker of the footage and inadvertently revealing Volkov's role in its production—which is so labour-intensive that it is made possible only by what one character calls “massive organizational redundancy, in the service of absolute authority. We're talking post-Soviet, right? And enormous personal wealth. [Volkov] isn't Bill Gates yet, but it wouldn't be entirely ridiculous to mention them in the same sentence” (330)—Cayce sets another, grander, plot into motion. Her presence at the footage's site of production unwittingly effects the introduction of Volkov with her boss, Hubertus Bigend, an advertising magnate who heads Blue Ant, an agency that is “more post-geographic than multinational” and which bills itself: “as a high-speed, low-drag life-form in an advertising ecology of lumbering herbivores. Or perhaps as some non-carbon-based-life-form, entirely sprung from the smooth and ironic brow of its founder [...] a nominal Belgian who looks like Tom Cruise on a diet of virgin's blood and truffled chocolates (6). In every sense, from his post-nationalism to his uncannily intuitive sense of advertising (matched only by Cayce herself), Hubertus personifies the forces of globalization in much the same fashion as Volkov: “He has less accent of any kind than she can recall having heard before in any speaker of English. It's unnerving. It makes him sound somehow directionless, like a loudspeaker in a departure lounge, though it has nothing to do with volume” (56).

Caught between these two capitalist demiurges, Cayce finds herself, if only for a moment and if only incidentally, at the epicenter of what she describes as “a new paradigm of history. Not a comfortable sensation... But, as Win [her father] had taught

her, the actual conspiracy is not so often about us; we are most often the merest of cogs in larger plans” (341). Cayce, then, is a mere individual caught up in forces beyond her comprehension. However, she is no simple cog. Her unwitting participation proves crucial. Much like her namesake in *Neuromancer*, Cayce’s presence (more specifically: her already noted powers of *reaction*) is required to catalyze the elements of the conspiracy itself, to set the plot into motion. Volkov’s empire, she is told by his adviser:

has necessarily been assembled piecemeal, owing to the recent, extraordinary, and very chaotic history of his country. A remarkable strategist, but until recently unable to devote much time or energy to the shaping of that which he’s acquired. Corporations and properties of all sorts have simply stacked up, if you will, awaiting the creation of a more systematic structure. This is now being done, and I am happy to say that I am a part of that, and you should know that you have had a part in it as well.” (336)³⁴

Cayce’s contribution is to breach Volkov’s carefully constructed defenses in her search for the maker of the footage, who turns out to be his niece, Nora. Maimed during an assassination attempt on her uncle’s life, Nora obsessively cuts and re-cuts elements from her student films as a way of mutely working through the trauma of her injuries. In the novel’s emotional climax, Cayce watches in fascination, moved by the creation of an aesthetic that somehow speaks to her own sorrow and loss. “It is here, in the languid yet precise moves of a woman’s pale hand. In the faint click of image-capture. In the eyes only truly present when focused on this screen. Only the wound, speaking wordlessly in the dark” (305). Catatonic when not working, Nora is supported in her art by her sister Stella, who takes the lead in disseminating her work, a complicated and extremely secretive process given the layers of security she must navigate. “You must understand,

³⁴ “I don’t see how,” Cayce responds, to which she is told, “it certainly wouldn’t have been obvious, least of all to you” (336).

these precautions are not unusual, for a man like my uncle,” Stella tells Cayce. “It is unusual that Nora is an artist, and her situation, her condition, is unusual, and that I wish her work to be seen, yes, but it is not unusual, here, that we should be protected” (307).

By finding Nora and Stella, Cayce unwittingly exploits a gap in their security apparatus, one that has begun to break down due to the competing impulses of obscurity and publicity. Indeed, much of the novel’s action consists of her dodging between what turns out to be the “malcoordinated tips of the pincers of Volkov’s security operation” (338). More importantly, Cayce’s intrusion provides the oligarch with an opportunity to break out of his carapace; its rigidity necessitated by the violent exigencies of capital accumulation in the New Russia, but antithetical to the freewheeling nature of capitalism itself. Specifically, Volkov’s protean holdings require the imposition of a form or shape, a task at which Bigend excels. “The client and I engage in a dialogue. A path emerges,” he tells Cayce. “I help the client go where things are already going” (62). So while Cayce’s quest for the secret behind the footage occupies *Pattern Recognition*’s foreground, her actions set into motion a chain of events that register mainly offstage, lost within the novel’s background of globalized capital.

“Have I told you I saw [Bigend] himself on CNN yesterday? He was between some Russian zillionaire and your Secretary of the Interior, and looked as though he’d just devoured the entrails of something clean-limbed and innocent; entirely pleased with himself,” a friend emails Cayce in *Pattern Recognition*’s epistolary epilogue, unaware of her central role in bringing Bigend and Volkov (the “zillionaire”) together (353). This novel, like all of Gibson’s fiction, is the story of a vanishing mediator, a figure who

makes history happen without ever becoming part of the historical record. In this sense, *Pattern Recognition* reads not so much as a return to the animating concerns of *Neuromancer* as a *rewriting* or *retracing* of it, an interpretation that the author seemingly invites given his use of the Case/Cayce homonym.³⁵ Beyond that, however, even the slightest of details are telling. For example, the plot of Gibson's first book is driven by the machinations of an AI called Wintermute, an entity that is described as a "cybernetic spider, slowing spinning webs" (269). In *Pattern Recognition*, one of Cayce's associates describes the meeting between Volkov and Bigend thusly: "It was like watching spiders mate" (330). Upon its first appearance in 1984's *Neuromancer*, the metaphor of AI-as-spider uncannily anticipates the very technology that it is meant to describe: the world wide web or, cyberspace. Gibson retains the spider as the privileged image of the order that underlies the seeming chaos of complex systems, although in the case of *Pattern Recognition*, the conspiracy is nothing other than the globalization of capital itself.

Conclusion: Capitalist Realism and the Gibsonian Masterplot

Cyberpunk authors, concludes Fred Pfeil, had the *mise en scene* right, but they had the story wrong (quoted in Moylan 184). This, of course, begs the question. What is the *story* of cyberpunk and by what standard are we to judge it a success or failure? In short, which story is the 'right' one and where does cyberpunk go 'wrong'? From the very

³⁵ While certainly the most obvious, this is not the only parallel between *Pattern Recognition* and Gibson's cyberpunk novels. Cayce, in fact, serves as a composite figure. In addition to the protagonist from *Neuromancer*, she bears a striking resemblance to *Count Zero*'s Marly Krushkova, a curator hired by Josef Virek; that text's equivalent to the AIs or Volkov. Sensing the machinations of an AI behind the appearance of a novel art form on the international art market, Virek uses Marly's highly refined aesthetic sensitivity as a means of identifying the hidden hand and thus positioning himself to deal with the concealed entity. In the same way Bigend contracts with Cayce, Marly observes: "Herr Virek is paying for my intuition" (103).

beginning, critics have drawn attention to the seeming disconnect between the vivid immediacy of cyberpunk's depiction of the near-future and the formulaic plot structures used to navigate it.³⁶ *Neuromancer*, as in so many other things, sets the tone. "What makes Gibson's novel such a remarkable achievement is not the conventional action-adventure plot through which Case moves, nor the tediously cynical and sentimental attitude with which he orients himself to his environment," argues Carl Freedman. "It is, rather, the delineation of that environment itself" (195). In a wide-ranging interview with Gibson, Larry McCaffery notes that *Neuromancer*'s "plot is very traditional: the down-and-out gangster who's been jerked around and wants to get even by pulling the big heist." Gibson concedes the point, explaining that for his first novel, he was eager to work within a familiar set of conventions. "I knew I was so inexperienced that I would need a traditional plot armature that had proven its potential for narrative traction... the plot had to be something I was already comfortable with" (271).

What is curious about this statement is the fact that Gibson hasn't strayed far from these supposedly tired formulas in his subsequent work. This could be seen as a case of arrested development; Gibson trapped within his comfort zone. Indeed, this seems to be the implication of many critics when they suggest that his post-*Neuromancer* work has been something of a letdown. In part, the assumption seems to be that having 'invented'

³⁶ "Gibson's work is a tour-de-force of the postmodern aesthetic brought to life," notes Claire Sponsler (628). In fact, the terms she uses to describe it are strangely familiar. "A surprising amount of narrative space is devoted to descriptions of clothing, human bodies and faces and exteriors of buildings and man-made artifacts of all kinds" (629-30). Gibson's writing, in other words, is reminiscent of Bret Easton Ellis's, who is similarly a savant of setting, the "vividly displayed surface reality—its settings and its objects—is perhaps the most immediately striking feature of Gibson's books" (630). The thrust of her argument is to condemn this aesthetic strategy; that by seducing the reader with the surface glitter, Gibson leaves the background uninterrogated, unchallenged, and ultimately, intact. In contrast, I argue that Gibson recognizes the spectacle of contemporary culture is blinding unless seen through an aperture. "I think we live in an incomprehensible present and what I see myself as trying to do is to illuminate the moment. *I'm not trying to explain the moment, I'm trying to make it accessible*" (*No Maps*, italics mine).

the future, Gibson's next task was to devise an entirely new representational mode appropriate to it. His failure to do so and his ongoing reliance on the tired narratives of detective fiction and spy thrillers suggested that Gibson in particular and cyberpunk in general were both stuck at a formalist impasse, imperiling the legacy of both. Chiding cyberpunks for settling for "narrative conservatism," Brooks Landon observes that:

cyberpunk writers have proved oddly wedded to older models of writing. In failing to imagine that the computers that so radically reshaped the cyberpunk semblance could also radically reformulate narrative structure itself, cyberpunk may eventually prove to be no more than a last gasp of print fiction as it slips under the steamroller of electronic culture. (165)

Claire Sponsler concurs: "cyberpunk falls seriously short at narrating new patterns of human action within this radically changed landscape" (641). She goes on to speculate on what such a radical reformulation might look like: "Based as it is on a radical understanding of the machine's impact on human experience, cyberpunk would seem to need plots that are also machinelike, that move synchronically and repetitively, or that like computers loop endlessly" (637). Ironically enough, I argue that Sponsler gets *exactly* what she asks for; that she has in effect described the Gibsonian masterplot.

Every one of Gibson's novels from *Neuromancer* to *Pattern Recognition* features a "machinelike" plot that progresses "repetitively," albeit one that unfolds at a remove from the generic conventions that make up the foreground of the plot. "Significantly, although the dominant culture always looms in the background—in the multinational corporations (the Maas-Biolabs and Hosakas) as well as in the form of a few powerful individuals (the Tessier-Ashpools and Josef Vireks of the world)—the surface attention is all on the counterculture," Sponsler herself notes. "It is these marginal figures caught up in the

‘dance of biz’ who hold Gibson’s attention and whose interconnections and activities supply much of the narrative interest” (629). The crucial point here is that the background can only be represented through this mediation. The “dance of biz” amounts to what Fredric Jameson (in a slightly different context) calls “a dialectical sleight-of-hand.”

Jameson was referring to Raymond Chandler, particularly the way in which he used the conventions of detective fiction to tell a different story, one of Los Angeles’ unending urban sprawl and the attendant difficulties of thinking one’s place within a space that itself seemed on the move. In Jameson’s reading, Chandler’s accomplishment was not so much in the detecting as it was in the careful juxtaposition of his detective’s ritualized movements within an even more carefully rendered space: L.A. sprawl. As Howard Hawks and William Faulkner found to their frustration in adapting *The Big Sleep* to the screen, the actual machinations driving the plot made sense to no one, including Chandler himself. Along these lines, I suggest that the value of Gibson’s fiction has less to do with the success or failure of the plot, the conventionally rendered action of the thriller, than with the way Gibson provides us with an *aperture*, restoring perspective to the otherwise dazzling spectacle of late capitalism. With this in mind, I adopt Jameson’s conclusions about Chandler as my own (with the appropriate emendations):

[Gibson] formally mobilized an ‘entertainment’ genre to distract us in a very special sense: not from the real life of private and public worries in general, but very precisely from our own defense mechanisms against that reality. The excitement of the [cyberpunk] plot is, then, a blind, fixing our attention on its own ostensible but in reality quite trivial puzzles and suspense in such a way that the intolerable space of [our multinational now-future, Capital itself] can enter the eye laterally, with its intensity undiminished. (152)

Gibson’s novels collectively function as a kind of camera obscura in that they project the inverted image of some otherwise unrepresentable external reality. The

process of refraction is generated by Gibson's deployment of conventional, even tired, narrative forms. In *Neuromancer*, for example, Tony Myers identifies "various pulp fictions, including those of the cowboy-frontier, spy, private detective, and gangster genres," but adds that "in its aggregation of forms, *Neuromancer* fails to afford a single generic point, other than itself, from which to establish its meaning" (897). In contrast to Myers, I argue that *Neuromancer*'s "meaning" is not dependent on any single stable point; in fact, that it is generated by the shift between these perspectives because it is only in the gaps where the background comes into focus. The question, then, is what do we "see" from this parallax view?

The Gibsonian masterplot is quite simply the accumulation of capital: the inexorable pressure of its acephalous drive. Gibson compulsively stages the repetitive movement whereby *capital accumulates itself*; implacable, indifferent to human agency or direction.³⁷ With this in mind, what one might call capitalist realism is the story that Capital tells to itself. Marx was among the first to overhear it, eavesdropping on the 'conversation' commodities hold amongst themselves (*Capital* 176). Today, however, this exchange has shifted, become spectral. Rather than elicit the mute testimony of things, contemporary practitioners of capitalist realism cast for voices on the wind; attentive to the moments when, amidst the "roar of money," *it* speaks. In the introduction to the dissertation, I discussed how our most cherished notions of selfhood are rooted in the doctrine of possessive individualism; that self-possession requires a minimal degree of reification in order to establish identity. In the spectacle of the AIs or Josef Virek in

³⁷ Indifferent, but not entirely independent: "Cyberspace exists, insofar as it can be said to exist, by virtue of human agency" (*Mona Lisa Overdrive* 129).

Gibson's earlier fiction and Bigend and Volkov in his most recent, we are presented with the opposite realization.³⁸ Possession presumes a subject. In Gibson's fiction, capital occupies an artificial subject position by virtue of this activity. Its avatars are minimally recognizable because they are performatively identical to us, recalling the basic index of identity: *self-possession*. The AIs may not have a self, but *they possess* and the semblance of a self is generated thereby. Gibson's fiction, proclaims David Brande, "is a dream of late-capitalist ideology"; both a dream *about* late capitalism and the dream *of* late capitalism itself (511).

³⁸ Along the lines of what Timothy Melley calls postmodern transference (37-42).

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APPENDIX
An Interview with Chuck Palahniuk

This interview catches up with novelist Chuck Palahniuk, the subject of my second chapter, just after he finished *Haunted* and just prior to going on tour in support of it. Touching on all of his published fiction, we took the opportunity to discuss some of the main themes that animate his work, the anxiety of influence, reasons for his foray into genre fiction with *Haunted*, and the perils of writing “transgressive” fiction after 9/11. The following consists of a conversation held over email in February and March of 2005.

— Matt Kavanagh

Getting Started

MK: Among other things, your first novel *Fight Club* features a paramilitary group that engages in various acts of anti-capitalist terrorism. Your second novel is narrated to the flight recorder of a hijacked commercial jet. The film based on *Fight Club* concludes in spectacular fashion—the destruction of an unnamed city’s financial center. And all this before September 11. At the time your novels and David Fincher’s film came out, they seemed symptomatic of widespread pre-millennial tension. Now they seem both uncannily prescient and yet strangely distant. It would seem that even though Y2K and 9/11 are events separated only by a matter of months, they belong to completely different worlds. What do you think about the War on Terror? If you hadn’t enjoyed success prior to it, do you think you would have ever found your audience?

CP: In the days after September 11, 2001, my editor told me that several book projects had just died on his desk. These were all “transgressional” fiction, like *Fight Club* or

American Psycho, where characters act out in order to gain a sense of personal power.

According to my editor, Random House didn't feel the market would support these stories in the near future. At 20th Century Fox, the studio bosses quietly let the option expire on my second book, *Survivor*, despite having spent significant money on the screenplay and development. Again, because no one could expect an audience to see humor or insight in any form of civil disobedience or consensual violence. In subsequent book contracts, fewer publishers are offering to protect writers from lawsuits based on readers who might injure themselves or others while mimicking the events of a book. Until September 11, 2001, my publishers had always offered legal protection to me. Now, publishers say that rising insurance rates (due to 9/11) have ended that practice. If someone does something stupid, and claims a book of mine prompted their action, the Random House lawyers won't come to my rescue. That's the most chilling trend. It's hard not to expect writers to muzzle their characters or very clearly depict "socially responsible" consequences for the events in their books. With the new possibility of "writers malpractice" lawsuits, no, I can't imagine *Fight Club* coming to market right now.

About the War on Terror – I have no idea.

MK: You've just finished *Haunted*, a collection of short stories that together form a larger narrative. How does it differ from the work that comes before it? What's next on the agenda?

CP: How does "Haunted" differ from my other novels? First, it consists of 23 short stories, welded together by the chapters of a novella. Free verse poems act as the

introduction for each story, and no single aspect of the book lasts longer than a few pages. My intention was to mimic the texture of “best of” collections. For example, the *Best of Poe*, which would alternate short novels with stories and poems. This would allow me to expand a story to 400+ pages while still building to moments of insight and drama on a rapid, regular schedule. The reader would find real “pay offs” about every twenty pages. The short stories would provide these frequent “reveals” without complicating the main plot with too many twists. It’s an all-you-can-eat buffet of story telling. And in a gruesome way it’s my “food” book. Every writer seems to write a novel based on food and cooking. Mine is based on starvation, but food plays a role in every story. Beyond that, the over-supply of drama is meant to trivialize drama, not just in books but in life. A tale full of sound and fury, but signifying Nothing – except our constant hunger for sound and fury. Conflict, fear, violence and hate exist because we LOVE them. That’s “Haunted.”

What’s next is a trilogy, or three-part novel based on non-fiction forms. An extended fake documentary about a dysfunctional near future. It’s already got my weekly writers workshop laughing.

MK: For a successful author, a new release invariably means a book tour. Canadian writer Margaret Atwood took some flak from fans recently for floating the idea of a virtual autographing machine, one that would allow her to sign her books from home. (Curiously, she brought this up at the same time that U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was roundly criticized by just about everybody when it was revealed that he was using an automatic signature writer on condolence letters for service members killed in action.)

What are your thoughts on book tours? Is Atwood (unlike Rumsfeld) onto something? When people vest so much in a signature, is a book still a book or just a piece of memorabilia?

CP: A book tour is the punishment for bringing a book to market. After all that time alone, or with a close group of friends, you're pushed in front of audiences and prompted to become a different person. Between these public events, which can last for hours and hours, you're alone in hotel rooms and airplanes. It's a roller coaster that would turn anyone into a manic-depressive. The biggest challenge is to "fool" myself into having a good time. This includes reading new, unpublished work – as wild as I can write – and, shipping give-away prizes to the events. If I start signing books early and make quick-enough progress, I can "doctor" the books with official-looking stamps that say things like: "Property of Such and Such Men's Prison Library" or mental hospital or sex-change clinic. Stamping the pages randomly, I can write an inscription that implies a long, sordid history between me and that particular reader. By being a fool, my goal is to avoid the pretentiousness of book readings. And to have fun.

Usually, at least half the people at my book events have never been to a public reading. I want their first book event to be shocking and funny and outrageous. If that means I have to throw dozens of bloody, severed hands and legs into the crowd – actually, very realistic Hollywood props – then, that's what I'll do.

MK: One story in the literary world that is playing out against the backdrop of this interview is the suicide of Hunter S. Thompson. You often discuss the centrality of non-

fictional devices in your fiction. I was wondering if the new journalism in general and gonzo journalism in particular provided you with any insights in how to meld the two?

CP: I haven't been a fan of "gonzo" journalism for a long time. For too long, it's been an excuse for the writer to navel gaze. Too many non-fiction articles have started with long, detailed descriptions of the writer's emotions as he chooses the perfect necktie for the interview. Or the writer's internal monologue in response to the subject of the article. These pieces seldom do more than showcase how clever the writer can be, when I'm more interested in the subject – which gets lost or ignored. This kind of cleverness usually becomes cruelty, and all it does is hide the writer's fear of being with the subject and asking honest, well-considered questions. "Gonzo" has come to mean scared, cruel, self-obsessed and lazy reporting.

What reporting I do is the very traditional creative non-fiction I learned in college, where the subject is presented and the reporter stays off camera. That way, the readers aren't constantly reminded that they're meeting the subject through an interpreter or filtering witness.

MK: *Haunted* is the third in a projected trilogy of horror stories. What prompted you to experiment in the horror genre? At a time when America is convulsed with domestic unrest and significant political tension, does genre fiction offer a safe port in the storm?

CP: Let's consider this from three angles: First, with our culture so equally divided, the only way to introduce new possibilities and insights will be by making them entertaining.

Charming or spooky or seductive, but in a seemingly neutral way. If the audience feels served and entertained, they're more likely to tolerate and recognize a different viewpoint. No one wants to spend their time and money getting preached at so any kind of a message must first be entertaining.

Second, I love horror. Ever since the old DC horror comic books and the 1970's occult boom, I've craved plot twists and hidden back stories and big reveals. By the 1980's horror became little but monotonous slasher films, and trite monsters, like vampires and werewolves. My goal was to invent some modern "monsters" or horror scenarios based on ordinary, banal parts of modern life. My book *Lullaby* deals with memes, and the way mass culture can fill your head and leave your mind crippled and unable to imagine or think. The next book, *Diary*, deals with gentrification and how a culture unaware of the past will make the same mistakes, again and again, forever. This spring's book, *Haunted*, deals with a thousand horrific ideas – but mostly with our loss of spirituality and how we'll torture ourselves for any assurance of an afterlife.

Third, transgressional fiction gets boring. Someone standing on a soap box and beating a drum can only hold any audience for so long. Writing within a genre is more fun for me, the writer.

Influences

MK: A quick glance at the jacket cover of a Chuck Palahniuk book shows that you have received praise from no less than Bret Easton Ellis, Thom Jones, and Robert Stone. The blurbs compare you to Don DeLillo, Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, and R. Crumb. That's heady stuff. There's also a fairly obvious theme here: something along the lines of

a literary fraternity embracing one of its own. And yet, the two authors that you credit most are women, Amy Hempel and Katherine Dunn. Did you miss the pledge ceremony?

CP: It's even more ironic when you consider that I've never finished a Delillo or Pynchon book. But I love reading Denis Johnson and Mark Richard. People just seem to need a short-hand with which to describe everything: White men. Black women. Asian women. Actually, it's very racist and sexist, being boiled down to skin pigment and genitalia. Most bookstores have become these little ghettos where white, black, gay and Jewish voices stand apart on their little shelves. Separate but equal.

I also enjoy Nora Ephron's essays and fiction. *Crazy Salad* is one of my favorite books. And I'm nuts for Joy Williams, especially her essay collection, *Ill Nature*. In it, Williams wrote: "You don't write to make friends." I'd like that tattooed on my forehead.

MK: Has anyone been left off this list?

CP: Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote. John Steinbeck and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Ira Levin is the God of Plotting. Michel Houellebecq is the God of sexiness. I pray to Dorothy Parker and Nathaniel West for bitter, heart-breaking ideas. And Ken Kesey isn't bad – for a white man from Oregon.

MK: *Diary*, has this question posed on the inside of the front cover: Where do you get your inspiration? It seems a fair question, so...

CP: Since I began to write, my process depends on being able to explore and vent my emotions around a personal issue that I can't resolve or tolerate. I can dress any on-going misery in the costume and mask of a metaphor and spend months wrestling with it in a very public way. By the time the book is done, I'm no longer emotionally reactive to the issue. I have no feelings about it. And the issue just – poof – disappears. It's very uncanny how this can happen. For example, my book, *Lullaby*, was really about my on-going war with a neighbor who'd blast her stereo outdoors, dominating every sunny day with her loud bagpipe music or Chinese opera. She'd lived in her house for decades and intended to die there. But after writing *Lullaby*, about the dominance of memes, I came home from book tour and found her house vacant. For sale. She'd packed everything, had a huge shouting match her husband and disappeared. The new neighbors are very nice, and writing that book kept me from going to jail for murder.

MK: Don DeLillo has said that his early fiction was as influenced by the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard as it was by any writer in particular. Indeed, *Invisible Monsters* features the typically cinematic language of jumpcuts to signal a transition between a series of quick takes. Does film figure in your creative process? What other types of cultural products have a hold on your imagination?

CP: This is how dumb I am. *Invisible Monsters* isn't inspired by "jump cuts" or any film device. It's inspired by the fat fashion magazines I used to see at the Laundromat. Those magazines seemed to present such chaos. All those stylized images and the hyperbole of

the language. The pages were never numbered, and the articles always “jumped” from page to distant page. These are magazines like *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*. I usually fall in love with some non-fiction form of printed communication, then copy those forms to tell a made-up story. That way, I benefit from the “authority” or credibility those non-fiction forms imply. If nothing else, the forms give me a new model for story telling. I seldom use anything from films. Okay, not seldom – never. Those non-fiction forms include the oral storytelling of an in-flight “black box” tape recorder in *Survivor*, the fourth step “personal inventory” of a 12-step group in *Choke*, and the “coma diary” kept by the loved-ones of coma victims in *Diary*. All, what historians would call “primary” history sources.

Romance

MK: In the new introduction to *Fight Club*, you discuss the novel’s reception: “One reviewer called the book science fiction. Another called it a satire on the Iron John men’s movement. Another called it a satire of corporate white-collar culture. Some called it horror. No one called it a romance” (xvii). Are you a romance novelist—for men?

CP: No. If you consider all my novels, you’ll find gender and race become unimportant.

MK: A line that gets repeated a couple of times in *Invisible Monsters* makes for a fitting epigraph to any number of your books: “*The one you love and the one who loves you are never, ever the same person*” (104). Your characters generally face some sort of a bar to romantic fulfillment, an impasse of sexual relations. *Fight Club* ends with the narrator

locked away in an asylum, his only contact with Marla—who he only belatedly realizes is his love interest—coming in the form of letters she writes to him. In both *Lullaby* and *Survivor*, the protagonists are long-time celibates who have been scarred by a past sexual trauma. Neither finds resolution in a conventional happy ending. Are you a writer of *failed* romances?

CP: Yes and no. My characters are – so far – always victims of themselves. They’re alone because they sabotage any chance of bonding with another person. They don’t want to give up what seems like autonomy in their lives, and become dependent on another person. This is less and less a “male” issue or fear. It’s become more common among the men and women I meet. Really, the relationship that forms is the first step toward the character uniting with a larger community of people. My first four books take individuals who are isolated in a way that society says should make us happy – isolated by their beauty or career or lovely home – and the plots reintroduce those people back to humanity.

Apostolic Fiction

MK: You’ve described *Fight Club* as “apostolic fiction”, a story told of a martyred hero by a follower who survives. Apostolic fiction is a mode that you’re certainly comfortable with—it recurs in most of your novels. Consider Tender Branson’s relation to his brother Adam in *Survivor*, Shannon McFarland’s relationship with Brandy Alexander in *Invisible Monsters*, Victor Ward and his mother in *Choke*, Misty and Peter Wilmot in *Diary*. Why

do your narrators continually adopt the position of the one left behind? In what sense do you consider yourself a survivor?

CP: In writing a story, I'm always aware of the storyteller and the audience. I need to create a "foil" who listens and acts as the reader, on the page. For the same reason Conan Doyle created Dr. Watson, I create a passive "innocent" (comatose or otherwise) to whom the protagonist can explain his worldview. Stories told in the third-person, where the storyteller "hides," and told to a nonspecific "listener" bore me. Creating a false "reality" or context for telling the story is as important as the story, itself. Actually – because there are so few plots – the context is more important. Imagine how boring, preachy and melodramatic *Citizen Kane* would be without the context of the newsreel reporters pursuing the central question of Rosebud?

MK: Clearly, there is something about this manner of narrative that resonates with the average reader. What do you think it is?

CP: Creating a context for the story embeds it in the reader's reality, making the story seem less "make believe." Then, by mimicking the way people tell stories out loud, and supporting the story with a raft of factual trivia, I can make the very improbable plot seem possible. All my devices serve to support plots which are usually based on true stories; but these are stories so full of extreme behavior and coincidence, that a reader wouldn't accept them without the supporting reality of context, natural speech patterns and factual details.

MK: I suppose this is characteristic of apostolic fiction, but a common refrain sounded by your characters is yearning for transcendence; however, it's a yearning that sidesteps organized religion. I'm thinking here of Tender's celebrity apotheosis in *Survivor*, Oyster's deep ecology in *Lullaby*, and Tyler's explicitly aesthetic turn in *Fight Club* ("a minute of perfection was worth the effort"). What sort of background do you bring to this and how does it inform your work?

CP: All my characters yearn simply to "fix" something. None of them are ready to accept their lives or situations. Part of this is simply the human need to create drama and challenge in order to entertain ourselves. Part, is the idea that we can achieve some perfect life without pain or shame. Another aspect is just the human drive to dominate others; that's Oyster's ambition: just to bully his peers and make them wrong if they don't accept him as superior. In *Survivor*, Tender continues to use the model for success he was taught as a child: Work hard. Be good. Please others. He clings to that blueprint until it fails him completely, and he's forced to create an adult path of his own. My entire life has been spent trying to achieve permanent happiness. I think that's the case for most people.

Writing

MK: In the new introduction to *Fight Club*, you explain that the genesis of the novel was a seven-page short story that you wrote in order to experiment with technique. What resulted—the *rules* of fight club—have attained pop immortality, if late night talk show

hosts are any indication. I was intrigued to hear that *Fight Club* originated as the solution to a formal problem as opposed to a moment of sociological insight (into, say, the crisis in masculinity). Have any other of your novels emerged out of a similar question of technique (i.e. *how* to tell the story as opposed to *what* you actually tell)?

CP: The novel that came out this spring, *Haunted*, was originally a collection of short stories. Besides those, I had an idea for a short novel about a writer's colony where the inmates would be trapped and confronted with their own limited talent and experience. Instead of publishing the collection and the novel separately, I've combined them so the short stories are told as backstories by the writers trapped in the colony. The resulting book is a mix of the realistic stories and the surreal framing device of what happens among the trapped writers. Again, this is just an experiment in storytelling, my attempt to combine different "textures" of story and information, and edit them to run together tightly and quickly.

MK: You suggest that much of your writing is done in public places and that you craft your work to be heard above the din of a noisy room. Are you writing for readers or listeners? Eyes or ears?

CP: I write for the nose. To create a sympathetic physical reaction in the reader, smells are very important in my books. Dialogue is less important. An odor hits everyone at once and it's harder to escape.

Class

MK: An enduring fantasy in America is that everyone is middle class or about to be. The characters in your fiction, though, are deeply suspicious of the mantra of middle-class uplift—and with good reason. The economy has become more volatile than it was a generation ago and any mention of jobs these days is usually framed as a lament over outsourcing (even Lou Dobbs, a CNN business commentator, has gotten in on the act by railing against the “exporting” of America). Is it fair to say your characters are class-conscious?

CP: My characters are suspicious of their own desire to succeed and isolate themselves. They’ve had a taste of success and the isolation it buys, and my characters realize that isolation will destroy them. So, they destroy their own “success” and force themselves back into community with other people. Maybe this is my Catholic upbringing, but my characters know that God is only present when two or more people are together. Their salvation relies on being forced to interact with others.

Adaptation

MK: *Fight Club* reminds me of Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*. Certainly, both novels share a fascination with violence, dark humour, and adversarial relation to consumer culture. Beyond that, however, I’d like to concentrate on the circumstances of their reception. *American Psycho* was pilloried by reviewers before it was even published, creating a critical firestorm that made any ‘innocent’ reading of it impossible. *Fight Club* had success as a cult novel since its publication, but what vaulted it into the popular

consciousness (and you onto the bestseller lists) was David Fincher's film adaptation and the outcry over *that*. Do you feel like your readers come to your work at a remove? Put another way, is the relationship between your first-time readers and your work akin to a blind date that's been set up by David Fincher, matchmaker?

CP: Yes, probably most readers find my work through David's movies. But... David's movie was so accurate at depicting the original book that it's difficult to say where the attraction starts. The chicken or the egg. Ellis was already famous when his book *American Psycho* debuted, and it dealt with non-consensual violence, where villains victimized others. The most-important aspect of *Fight Club* was the consensual nature of the violence. The terminally-ill characters were misled, but the protagonist was eventually unmasked and humiliated in front of them. It was a very, old-fashioned, socially responsible novel. All the social contracts were fulfilled.

MK: You've made some comments recently encouraging first-time readers to start with *Lullaby* since it is the least likely of all your novels to appear as a film. Part of your reasoning is that a reading a book, unlike watching a film, is a consensual experience. What do you mean by that?

CP: About the consensual nature of books, it takes time and effort to read a book, and the audience is free to stop at any time. It takes more effort to continue consuming the story than it does to stop. But, with a film, the audience is passive and more likely to be subjected to the story via a "trapped" setting such as an airplane or theater. Or surprised

by the film on television, coming uninvited into their home. Plus, seeing the film as part of a group marks the viewer as someone who's had that "experience." When you read a book, you can keep your experience private, and you can better control your participation with the story.

MK: *Fight Club* for Xbox and PS2. Did someone miss the point?

CP: Our culture digests everything by recreating it more and more, in simpler forms. So this was no surprise. Eventually everything becomes a one-liner on *The Simpsons*. My goal has never been to protect and defend my work. A finished book is dead to me. My priority is always the next, unfinished, exciting project.

Choking

MK: In *Choke*, Victor Ward makes a living by going to a restaurant and strategically choking in order to have someone step in and rescue him. Victor's logic is that once someone has saved your life, they are responsible for your welfare: "It's a homegrown version of those overseas children's charities" (77). In effect, he forces a relation of intimacy on a complete stranger, because what can be more intimate than being responsible for saving someone's life. This seems radically at odds with what we've come to see as the fundamental expression of individual agency: one's ability to *choose*. Is the most authentic gesture one that we're forced to make? Is our sense of agency conferred upon us from elsewhere?

CP: It's still a choice. The way I depict the choking scenes, people compete for the role of 'savior' because they know how it will raise their social stature and give them a heroic story to tell. Thereafter, their heroic status will depend on the continued life of the person they saved. As long as the "hero" believes himself to have "chosen" and to be the dominant party in the scene, the hero is happy. Once the hero discovers he's been manipulated, his dominant status ends. Still, you could argue that the newer status as "victim" makes the hero even more noble: Someone sinned-against for their best intentions.

MK: Beyond its plot function, choking is powerful metaphor. On the one hand, it attests to the gluttonous aspect of consumer culture. On the other hand, it is also an involuntary reflex, gagging. Does this ambivalence capture your own response to consumer culture?

CP: Very little of my work is about consumer culture; beating that drum gets boring, fast. I prefer the idea of "choking" as failing despite your best efforts. Like when you shoot foul shots in basketball, and the entire crowd shouts, "Choke! Choke! Choke!" Plus, there's less sexual baggage.

History

MK: Your novels don't give much of a sense of history beyond a general sense of the now. Paradoxically, that ahistoricism is itself a historically produced category. There's a line in *Invisible Monsters* that provides a clue as to when history went off the rails: "The future ended in 1962." What do the 1960s mean to you?

CP: The question has more to do with the Seattle World's Fair of 1962, an optimistic projection of the future – just before the chaos of the 1960's seemed to fixate on the world's problems instead of its blessings. That utopian landscape – featuring the Space Needle and Monorail – promised a world where most hardships had been overcome, and humanity could relax and venture into proactive, fun adventures like space travel. Instead, the world has fixated on pollution, disease, war and hardship. The problems instead of the blessings. I wanted this to suggest that “tipping point” in most people's lives, when they become disillusioned with their dreams and resign themselves to patchwork, stop-gap measures instead of the lofty visions they had as children.

MK: In *Fight Club*, Tyler is intent on toppling a massive office tower, but only because it will crush his real target: History itself as embodied by the national museum below. For the film, David Fincher changes the target to credit card companies. What did you think of this decision?

CP: It was the screenwriter, Jim Uhls, who decided that credit card companies would make a good target, one that would enroll the audience in the action. Part of making a movie is to make the symbolic into the literal – to manifest a timeless, placeless world, using the images and resources of the present world. I didn't care for making the target that literal, but I accept that my goal - to show a generation assuming control of their world and marking their place in history through a huge gesture - that might not translate

into a flesh-and-blood story presented to people eating popcorn and worried about their real debts.

Gender and Sexuality

MK: In *Fight Club*, you describe the triangle between the narrator, Tyler Durden, and Marla in the following terms: “This isn’t about *love* as in *caring*. This is about *property* as in *ownership*” (4). While it pointedly remains unclear just who occupies which role (owner or owned) in this passage, it echoes the feminist argument that women exist in patriarchal systems as little more than tokens exchanged between men. What is the status of women in your work?

CP: I consider my characters to have no race or gender. They each represent a dynamic that moves the plot, prompting other characters to take action. Doing this, they act out or demonstrate human behaviors and fallacies to comic effect. Even if the characters are destroyed or remain unenlightened, I hope the reader recognizes their errors and is less likely to make those same mistakes.

MK: In the various worlds you depict, the Father has disappeared, but patriarchal relations remain. Where does the power lie in a post-patriarchal society?

CP: The adult is the wall or resistance against which a child can test himself. It’s by battling the adult parent that the child learns to endure and to become stronger. I’d argue that this conflict works best between same-sex parents and children. In a world of absent

fathers, the son tends to test himself against society or the law, forming groups with other fatherless sons to support each other in shared battles with this larger authority. Power lies with the individual who succeeds at larger and larger goals, constantly seeking challenges in order to grow. Personal power cannot be defined by the “other” without losing power to that other and becoming used by – a reaction to – that other. Patriarchal or matriarchal or whatever.

MK: Freud described the ego as above all, a *bodily* ego. Our self-image is traced along the skin. Among the guys that you depict there seems to be an underlying panic about their bodies, one that predictably has psychic repercussions (*Fight Club* being the best example). Bodies are porous and permeable; they are subject to infiltration and dissolution. Bodies, in short, are unruly and require discipline, whether it is imposed from within (e.g. steroids) or without (e.g. consensual beatings). Is this anxiety specific to masculinity? Or is it more generally a crisis of late capitalist subjectivity?

CP: In the original short story, *Fight Club*, which became chapter six of the novel, the narrator says, “I just don’t want to die without a few scars. I see those cars that are stock cherry right out of a dealer’s showroom in 1956, and I think, ‘What a waste’” (48). In *Choke*, the female protagonist says, “You have to trade your youth for something” (207). In *Invisible Monsters*, the narrator destroys her face because her beauty isolates her, and she knows it’s transitory and allows her to easily dominate others. All my books deal with the paradox of staying aware of mortality while not being stopped by the fear of death. My characters use their physical bodies as vehicles or means for living a full life,

not trying to preserve their youth and prevent death. They're willing to destroy their appearance and current identity for a chance at real enlightenment and insight.

Fandom

MK: You have an unusually reciprocal relationship with your fans. Your official website, www.chuckpalahniuk.net, for example, started out as a fan endeavor. Now it is home to an online writing workshop. What exactly is your relationship to this workshop? What do you hope to accomplish with it?

CP: I contribute essays to the website, monthly, and answer questions submitted by visitors, about how I write. This way, I can share aspects of the “Minimalism” style I wish I'd known as a beginning writer. Online, I can answer a single question for a large audience instead of answering that question again-and-again on an individual basis. Really, the website is no different than a newsletter I might distribute, or class I might teach. To take the spotlight off myself and redirect attention to a subject that serves more people, I'm supporting the website's focus on encouraging and helping writers.