

THE TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL LOGICS OF POSTMODERN MASCULINITY

MAPPING THE (CON)TEXTUAL PLIGHT OF MAN:
THE TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL LOGICS
OF
POSTMODERN MASCULINITY

By

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Abstract

My thesis, *Mapping the (Con)textual Plight of Man: The Temporal and Spatial Logics of Postmodern Masculinity* brings together a number of Marxist and Post-Structuralist theorists in order to make sense of the notion of “crisis” that surrounds contemporary masculinity. As the alleged crisis in masculinity is a discourse that is not only embedded within fictional texts, but is also a prominent figure in social science’s theories on contemporary masculinity, a necessary beginning for this project is an introduction that proposes a new theoretical apparatus for the study of masculinity – one that builds upon the work of Marxist Postmodernist theorists in order to focus upon the impact that the shift in capitalist logics (from a society of production to one of consumption) has had upon masculine identity.

This theoretical apparatus is then used as a grounds to study the sentiments and violence of men in three contemporary fictional texts: Brett Easton Ellis’s and Mary Harron’s *American Psycho*, George Walker’s *End of Civilization*, and Chuck Palahniuk’s and David Fincher’s *Fight Club*. While the first chapter serves as a context from which to study the way that the cultural logics of postmodernism affect men, the second and third chapters document and analyse the way that men strive to locate and enact an outside to postmodernist culture through a nostalgia which is, paradoxically, simply another feature of postmodernism. The ultimate aim of this project, then, is to provide an objective analysis of the temporal and spatial logics which act as scripts for the performance of contemporary masculinity, and to locate an outside to the notion of crisis which fuels the frustration and violence that is evident in these three texts. It is in the third chapter, with a turn towards Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theory of the rhizome, that a viable outside to this postmodern crisis is proposed and explored.

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Introduction: The Temporal and Spatial Logics of Postmodern MasculinityThe Contemporary Crisis in Masculinity

The discourse of a masculinity that is in crisis has emerged with prominence. Whether this crisis is real or imagined is not of significance, for as soon as a discourse is formulated, deployed, and circulated within a society, it becomes real; it is an irrepressible linguistic reality. Some of the rhetoric that shapes, fuels, and criticizes this crisis can be found in our contemporary texts (whether filmic or literary), and I will use this space to explore three such texts.

American Psycho (Ellis 1991, Herron 2000), *The End of Civilization* (Walker 1999), and *Fight Club* (Palahniuk 1996, Fincher 2000) are all texts in which men react violently to the threats that they perceive are being inveighed against their masculinity. Masculinity, paradoxically, is inextricably linked with existentialist notions in these three texts. This is paradoxical as masculinity itself is a construction that is intimately linked to capital, a relationship which I will explore at greater length over the course of this introduction. There is, therefore, nothing essential to masculinity itself as a contingency is always implied upon its consideration. Although the perceived crisis in masculinity manifests itself in the form of an existential crisis, it is a search that reaches back to an established masculinity rather than an inward search for an individual essence. Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* goes to extreme lengths in order to consume a masculine essence; in *The End of Civilization*, Henry becomes nostalgic for a productive past in which men were able to differentiate themselves from other men in

order to establish their greatness; and *Fight Club* sees its protagonist revolting against a society that is so perversely commodified that it is the furniture and clothes which a man buys that defines his essence. My project is to make sense of the rhetoric of a masculinity that is in crisis, a crisis which is in all three texts linked with the logics of the capitalist market.

I will bring Marxist and Existentialist theory together in order to understand the effect that free market capitalism has had upon the male subject, and, more specifically, in order to tease out and analyse the effect that capital's newly established and inescapable postmodern logics have had upon man's search for his essence. As it is by means of these devices that I will attempt to make sense of man's subjective (dis)positionings within postmodern texts, it is necessary that I begin by introducing the devices themselves and their relation to the thematics that are of central concern to such an analysis.

The Temporal Logics of Postmodern Masculinity

It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place (Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*)

When considering contemporary masculinity, it is imperative to banish the forgetfulness of which Jameson speaks from our present-day memories. We must conceive of our concepts in terms of so many layers so that we can peel them back, not to arrive at some core of truth, but, rather, to recognize that our "truths" are not really

truths at all, but are comprised of so many overlapping “truths,” both conflicting and complimentary. Even when speaking of complimentary truths, these complimentary relationships are always known in the light of the other contradictions; it is, as we know, through difference that meaning is deferred, and the difference through which we know ourselves, in this case, as men, is very much a temporal one.

There are few theorists left in the study of masculinities who treat questions of gender ahistorically. It is widely accepted that concepts of masculinity are both historically and culturally contingent. An area of interest in the study of masculinities is the way in which old roles and concepts carry themselves over into our new temporalities where they no longer have a context in which to sit and can only remain as anachronisms. There is a set of proposed “truths” that circulates around the masculine subject. These truths, however, are no longer operational -- they simply do not align themselves with the modern structures of society. As the masculinity of a specific society is always the one that is necessarily appropriate to it, the fundamental paradox that lies at the centre of man’s postmodern existence is that the masculinity of consumer society seems to be, to a large extent, anachronistic. Man’s present quests for masculinity are both structured by, and located within his past. The notion of crisis develops when that which is spoken in terms of essentiality can no longer be plugged into the social structure.

Fredric Jameson, in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, characterizes our current temporal shift as one from modernity to postmodernity, a difference that is characterized by the introduction of new thematics, a central one being

the shift towards consumption and away from production. One is both consumed within the system of commodification and one acts as a consumer; rather than *being*, the consumer devours his subjectivity based upon his interaction with a system of objects. One is consumed within the consumer society as the entire system of this society “is no longer anything but a giant simulacrum— not unreal, but simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 11). The consumer / postmodern society operates without an outside: all value and therefore all of “reality” itself is located within the simulacrum of commodification and consumption – symbolic exchange. The consumer, devoured within this reality, *being* a consumer, can only devour a subjectivity that is simply another of the sets of values that circulates within this “uninterrupted circuit” -- an “essence” that is available for consumption in the form of images, messages, fashions, etc., that circulate as commodities in the consumer society.

As Jean Baudrillard makes clear in *The Consumer Society*, organized consumption is both an equivalent and an extension of nineteenth-century industrialization that had production as its central tenet:

The same process of rationalization of productive forces which took place in the nineteenth century in the sector of *production* reaches its culmination in the twentieth in that of *consumption*. The industrial system, having socialized the masses as labour power, had much further to go to complete its own project [*s'accomplir*] and socialize them (that is, control them) as consumption power. The small savers or anarchic consumers of the pre-war age, who were free to consume or not, no longer have any place in this system. (82)

The shift from a system of production to one of consumption, therefore, does not signify a radical historical split -- but is, rather, a form of continuity. This continuity, however, is abstracted from the masses; it is the continuity of a larger project whose vision -- or, logic -- is not constituted by the eyes of its participants. While the eyes of capital remain clear and focused (to preserve and continue this larger project), the masses are made to wear new lenses (since this continuity for capital requires a new form of subjectivity from the masses). As consumption is the newer equivalent of production, the masses must be resocialized in terms of this necessary imperative.

In order to better understand the manner in which a temporal shift can simultaneously be a continuity and a break (consumer society being both a break with nineteenth-century production and its logical outcome), it is useful to conjure another of Baudrillard's models, that of simulation. Baudrillard's use of Borges's map as a metaphor for simulation is especially useful to map the temporal and spatial limits of masculinity:

If we were able to take as the finest allegory of simulation the Borges tale where the cartographers of Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up exactly covering the territory (but where the decline of this Empire sees the map become frayed and finally ruined, a few shreds still discernible in the deserts . . .) then this fable has come full circle for us . . . Abstraction today is no longer that of the map the double, the mirror, or the concept . . . today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. *The desert of the real itself*. . . [I]t is with the same Imperialism that present day simulators try to make the real, all the real, coincide with their simulation models. (*Simulations* 1-2)

If we collapse Baudrillard's notion of simulation with his theories on the subject in

consumer society, we realize that man in consumer society is, at the very least, twice removed from any type of essential masculinity. As noted above, in the age of industrialization, the masses were made to conceive of themselves as “labour power:” capital drew the map of production upon a subject’s mind and body. In other words, the identity of the male subject became inextricably linked with the logics of production in the age of industrialization. The Empire of the capitalists (or, the society that was mapped by present-day Imperialists) has not declined like the Empire of which Borges speaks: it has continued to prosper. Rather than allowing their map to deteriorate due to a crisis of overproduction, capital called in their cartographers to remap the producer subject into one who lives by the logic of consumption. While this new map is masterfully stitched, covering both landscape and subject, there remain a few loose threads which allow the subject to glimpse at that old landscape (production) that resides beneath. While postmodernism operates without an outside (the postmodern landscape is the new and confusing canvas upon which all space and time are painted) this overdetermination does not banish that old canvas completely from the subject’s eyes and mind.

When we extend our analysis, returning to the specific subject at hand -- man in contemporary consumer society -- we find yet another map which resides below that of production: the map of masculinity itself. These three maps (consumption, production, and masculinity) are concurrent: they overlap and interact in ways that are fundamental to understanding the current status of the male in consumer society. Man’s old patterns of being are not erased, they are merely stitched into his new self in a manner in which it

becomes difficult to discern the individual properties of these patterns. While all of society finds itself plunged within the culture of consumption “to the point of being unable to imagine anything else” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 207), if we are to think historically, we will be able to independently analyse the elements that currently inform masculinity. Now that we have worked backwards, peeling back two significant layers in order to arrive at the third layer – masculinity, which is the central concern of our analysis -- we will spend some time traversing this third map before changing direction, re-covering the masculinity that we have just uncovered, in order to address the interactions, both complimentary and contradictory, which result from this layering of logics.

The Spatial Logic of Contemporary Masculinity

The Male Body: Essential Masculinities

It is on the basis of the sexed body that man and women are given to their separate spaces (or, realms): the masculine and the feminine. The substance that is found at this level of man is often formed by appeals to biology. In their attempts to map the mind and body of man, scientists study hormonal secretions and neural firings, following these paths to the centre of the male body. Observational penetrations begin as articulations (hypotheses), they drive into the object of study (in this case, the body of man), and then they move back outward – out from the object in order to be uttered by the mouth of the subject that is, in this case, science. Such “truths” always begin and end with the words of the subject: the object is pinned under, and forced to speak the

significations of the subject. The body, then, can only be dispersed and uncovered for us through the limits of language. While many instruments are used to prod and slice open our bodies, the instruments that are always at the centre of all of our incisions and discoveries are our tongues. The subject (science) is always outside of the object (the sexed body) of study, and, in this particular institutionalized and esteemed power dynamic, it is always the subject who speaks. Our bodies were always already gendered by our collective unconscious; science is the language with which we speak this psychosis (an artificial set of principles that are mapped onto the sexed body), making it manifest.

By being the object of study, the masculine subject becomes infected with the neurosis of crisis. I speak of neurosis rather than psychosis here because we are speaking of something more specific; the crisis in masculinity is a dualism (or a binary depending on the manner in which the crisis is internalized by the male subject) that confuses the gendered subject as opposed to the general confusion that genders the sexed subject as outlined in the discussion above.¹ There is a masculinist tendency in

¹ While a psychosis is a major illness that is characterized by a major distortion of reality (ie. the gendering of the sexed body), neurosis is a relatively minor form of illness that manifests itself in the form of anxiety or depression. The neurosis of man is the anxiety that results from the unstable relationship between his historical identity as producer and his newer identity as a consumer. In speaking upon the workings of capital, Félix Guattari notes that, “with its throttling, its stasis, its lesions, its neuroses, the capitalist state imposes its norms, establishes its models, imprints its features, assigns its roles” into the depths of subjects’ bodies (“In Order to End the Massacre of the Body” 29). Furthermore, he notes, “it is a castrating regime, which produces a guilty, neurotic, scrabbling, submissive drudge of a human being” (30). Guattari is speaking of castration in the Oedipal sense, here: a severing of individual desires. The characteristics of capital – its neuroses, in particular – brand themselves upon the body of the subject who is subsumed within the simulation of capitalism.

some psychology (due to its connections to the positivist realm of science) that makes it a fertile ground for igniting and fuelling the fires of masculine crisis.² Such psychology takes the *fabric of masculinity* as a neglected real, locating problems within a real masculine subject rather than observing the fabric of a new society enveloping another fabric (the masculine body) stitched of the same threads, albeit woven in a new pattern. Such scientists shout that it is flesh, blood, and bowels that are being enshrouded by the advent of a new era, but *one can never speak of bodies, only fabric, old or new, stitched by the movements, gestures, and sequences of our tongues.*

The historical male subject lies much in the same vein as the scientific one. The discursively constructed man of history is active, aggressive, and rational as opposed to his female counterpart who is passive, docile, and irrational.³ Attempts have been made to trace the historical origins of sex differentiation, where aggressivity and rugged individuality are located in the man of hunter / gatherer societies, and separate spheres emerge as a result of the shift into agricultural subsistence.⁴ As the drawing of such

Therefore, to speak specifically to the problem of the postmodern, the anxiety that is experienced by capital as it moves into a new phase – a new logic – is also experienced by the subject; he is confused about the nature of his contours and desires as a result of this transition.

² For discussions by psychologists on the crisis in masculinity, see Peter Stearns (1990) and Warren Farrell (1993).

³ Both Doyle (1989) and Whitehead and Barrett (2001) state that these differentiating “essences” are everywhere to be found in our discourses on gender.

⁴ For such a history, see Peter Stearns (1990 17-47). In a section entitled “The Tradition of Manhood: Western Patriarchy,” Stearns follows man through the succession of historical epochs, offering as fact his postulations upon the nature of man throughout this history.

historical lines offers a naturalization of the dominance of man through evolutionary legitimization, we see that such a history does not fall so far from the positivist pollutions of science. Where such a history is concerned, Baudrillard states that:

This entire history of male domination, of phallocracy, the immemorial male privilege, is perhaps only a story. Beginning with the exchange of women in primitive societies, stupidly interpreted as the first stage of woman-as-object. All that we have been asked to believe, the universal discourse on the inequality of the sexes, the theme song of an egalitarian and revolutionary modernity . . . is perhaps one gigantic misunderstanding. The opposite hypothesis is just as plausible and, from a certain perspective, more interesting – that is, that the feminine has never been dominated, but has always been dominant.⁵ (*Seduction* 15)

Baudrillard does not only expose such histories as poorly woven stories (the French word “histoire” that stands in for both history and story is definitely appropriate here), but he turns such claims on their head, arguing that our conceptions of dominance are based upon our discursively constructed notions of desire. Baudrillard constructs his own hypothesis, creating a dialectic between his formulations and those of scientists and historians:

One can hypothesize that the feminine is the only sex, and that the masculine only exists by a superhuman effort to leave it. A moments distraction, and one falls back into the feminine. The feminine would have a decisive advantage, the masculine a definite handicap. One sees how ridiculous it is to want to “liberate” the one in order to accede to the fragility of the other’s “power,” to the eccentric, paradoxical, paranoid

⁵ Baudrillard’s central argument in *Seduction*, a Lacanian analysis of the feminine as object, is that femininity “is on the same side of madness. It is because madness secretly prevails that it must be normalized (thanks to, amongst other things, the hypothesis of the unconscious). It is because femininity secretly prevails that it must be recycled and normalized (in sexual liberation in particular)” (17).

and tiresome masculine state . . . The driving force is not penis envy, but on the contrary, man's jealousy of woman's power of fertilization. The female advantage could not be atoned; a different order had to be built at all costs, a masculine social, political and economic order, wherein this advantage could be reduced.⁶ (*Seduction* 16)

The real, then, the landscape which resides below simulacra and simulation, and outside of the symbolic, is allied much more closely to women.⁷ In order to recuperate himself from a state of subordinated "otherness," man engendered woman as the subordinate "other" within his simulacral economies. It is because the voices of women have so long been excluded from the discourses that flow in the public realm that women have primarily been engendered through and by the voices of men. Feminist theorists like Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous argue that woman must write from her body— this is the only manner in which woman can be properly articulated and understood as woman rather than as a construction of the phallogocentric language which would pin them down on the fringes of the fabric that has been stitched by and for man (the masculine social, political, and economic order).⁸ Man, however, has not only been stitched into

⁶ While Baudrillard's comments appear to be anti-feminist at first blush, his point is not to promote the continued dominance of men but to, as he does in his criticism of Marxism, point to the ways in which revolutionary movements often legitimize the workings of an oppressive system. Baudrillard is certainly not a proponent for the oppression of women; he is, rather, scrutinizing the rhetoric of "liberation," a seemingly ridiculous language to employ when the object of liberation is to be wholly subsumed within the logic of a simulation.

⁷ Julia Kristeva's discussions on maternity align her with Baudrillard's privileging of the female real through fertility. In particular, see "Stabat Mater" (*The Kristeva Reader* 161-186).

⁸ Hélène Cixous's "Laugh of the Medusa" is particularly illustrative in this respect. Cixous writes that "if woman has always functioned 'within' the discourse of

the simulation of masculinity, but has *stitched himself* in to the point that no traces of the real remain to be seen or spoken where man is concerned. While the real is absent for both the male and female subjects, the objectification of woman by man (woman as object signified by man) is much more evident than the objectification of man by man himself.⁹ If we are to follow the history of man, it can never be a real history, but only a simulated one, discursively constructed to the point that its simulacra multiply and gel, blanketing the expanse of the real, and banishing its landscape from both sexes. In order to trace such a history, it will be useful to follow Baudrillard's phases of the image towards the landscape of simulation.

In *Simulations*, Baudrillard outlines the successive phases of the image which lead to the banishing of the real beneath the all-encompassing shroud of simulation. For Baudrillard, the image passes through four phases in the process of becoming a simulation. The image

-is the reflection of a basic reality

man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this 'within,' to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of' (2050). It is important to note here, that when Cixous says "tongue," she is using the French word "langue" which means both tongue and language. Furthermore, Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine* is not strictly "female writing," but it is a certain type of writing that refuses to signify in a specific way – it is a reaction against phallogocentric language.

⁹ As woman now shares the voice that circulates in the public realm for the purpose of commodity construction in the consumer society, woman now shares with man the opportunities of self-objectification.

- it masks and perverts a basic reality
- it masks the *absence* of a basic reality
- it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (*Simulations* 11)

In other words, the image, in the first phase, comes to *represent* a structured reality. It holds itself up as a mirror to this reality, capturing within itself its basic properties. The second stage sees this representation becoming intertwined and, to a degree, interchangeable with the reality that it represents. This “masking” is so intimate that slight and virtually imperceptible alterations in the image “pervert”(or warp) reality: its structure no longer simply represents reality, but becomes it. The third phase of the image is an intensification of this becoming; the image becomes reality by annexing the real’s presence as “the absent:” it was never there in the first place. With the fourth phase, the project is complete: the image has established itself as a reality independent of the reality upon which its birth was contingent..

Returning to Baudrillard’s hypothesis on female dominance, we can begin to map the successive phases of the image which have, through their historical layering, moulded an “uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 11). Where masculinity is concerned, the basic reality which is reflected is the fertility of women: as Baudrillard argues, in order to mask the dominance of women (fertility), men created a social, political, and economic order. Thus, *men reflect the productive powers of women with their own simulacral productions*. The production of capital, an economic language which can never be reduced to a phenomenon which is solely economic, is reproduced by the political and social order that man created

alongside the economic one. The new “reality” that masks the old one is discursively constructed; the language and symbols that are deployed within the political and social realms are central to the complexity and completeness of the eclipse of simulated masculinity. It is not until the epoch of consumption that we move to the third and fourth phases of the image, but, until we arrive at that history, much needs to be said about the initial phases of the image in the era of production.

Towards a Critical Consideration of Masculinity: Base and Superstructure in the Age of Production

In “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” Raymond Williams notes that in some of the best Marxist cultural analysis, questions are formulated towards epochal rather than more precise and contradictory historical configurations (168). While this is true, it is only through the positing of such epochal questions that we are able to discover the workings of dominant cultures, those cultures that pervade and affect consciousness to the greatest degree. These dominant epochs, in Baudrillard’s terms, signify the successive phases of the image which move us from simulacral layering to the all-encompassing map of simulation.

As we move towards an analysis of the epoch of production, it is tempting to say that men have been produced as a mirror of the market, for if we turn to some of the dominant messages that flow as “truths” around the realm of masculinity, we find that many of these messages can be located in the epoch of production. The normative messages which circulate around the realm of masculinity – that men are workers,

bosses, and rugged individuals¹⁰ – fit men directly and comfortably within the mould of production. Even the concept of man as “lover” has as its primary corollary the role of “breadwinner” (Harris 3). Rather than studying the hegemonic production of masculinity by the institution of production, it is much more useful to conceive of masculinity as an artifice which men themselves produce due to their participation and interactions within institutions. It is because notions of masculinity flow immanently amongst men that they are perceived by men as being “truths.” “Truth,” Foucault argues, “is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A ‘regime’ of truth” (133). This regime of truth, a truth which is always and everywhere a falsity, is “a death sentence to every reference” (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 11). Truth is *produced* rather than observed, it is simulacrum rather than reality.

The notion that truth is produced in a circular fashion is amenable to Raymond Williams’s central concern in his rethinking of the traditional base and superstructure model, a model in which the base is determining and the superstructure is determined. In order to move away from a notion of a culture that is overly-determined, Williams argues that

We have to revalue “determination” towards the setting of limits and the exertion of pressure, and away from a predicated, prefigured and controlled content. We have to revalue “superstructure” towards a related

¹⁰ In an extensive series of surveys and interviews with men on the messages that they receive in forming their conceptions of masculinity, Ian Harris (1995) discovered that men are conceived of as being standard bearers, workers, lovers, bosses, and rugged individuals.

range of cultural practices, and away from a reflected, reproduced or specifically dependent content. And, crucially, we have to revalue “base” away from the notion of a fixed economic or technological abstraction, and towards the specific activities of men in real economic or social relationships, containing fundamental contradictions and variations and therefore always in a state of dynamic process. (165)

If we are to subscribe to this more fluid notion of the base – where the superstructure is not simply determined by singular imperatives fixed by the abstractions of technology and economy found at the base – we must locate the “specific activities of men” that act to set the limits of the superstructure (the superstructure, in our case, being the social map of masculinity). As we move into our first area of epochal analysis, where productive wage labour became the dominant trend for men, we must refuse to fall into the trap of conceiving of dominant cultures as singular hegemonies. It is through the spatial and social organization of men, and through men’s performances within these spaces, that we will be able to conduct a “broader historical analysis of men producing themselves, themselves and their history” (Williams 166).

As Michael S. Kimmel argues, the characteristics of man are deployed within the marketplace; aggression, competition, and anxiety are all attributes that are discursively constructed around the notion that man’s place is in the public realm (271-272). The new man of the marketplace would not only accumulate wealth, power, and status from his integration within the capitalist market, but he was also to “derive his identity entirely” from his success within it (Kimmel 270). Central to the spatial organization of labour is the fact that, historically, work has been organized, managed, and performed by men. The gendered line that separates public and private at this point in history is

well pronounced: the “truth” of masculinity is derived from the male’s participation within the gendered labour force, which serves to both engender labour and the male subject as masculine.

This regime of truth, however, is not limited to its circulation within the public domain of labour; it also structures the institution of the family where the man’s role as “breadwinner” defines his role as “lover” and “father,” and further acts to establish the truth of his masculinity. As David H. J. Morgan argues, although other configurations of the masculine identity persist outside of the established role of the male as breadwinner, these other identities “derive their meaning in part from their relationship to this central signifier of masculine identity” (226). Even when man’s central responsibility of breadwinner is put aside, Morgan argues that “the domestic haven” is constructed as the place where a man is to gain strength and support in order to “participate all the more effectively in the world of paid employment and public life” (226). Therefore, a man’s place outside of work, within the private domain of the family household, is always contingent upon, and always rearticulates and reinforces his public participation within the workforce.

While the extrinsic and intrinsic effects of work are easily apparent in studying man’s adoption of the role of worker (man attains a sense of fulfillment from undertaking the role of wage labourer in order to support both himself and his family), as Stephen M. Whitehead argues, paid work has ontological effects upon the discursive subject, and these effects are due to a complex web of factors. The effects of paid work are both temporal and spatial, as paid work provides a notion of location and

permanence, the activities of work taking place “within and across numerous organizational locations, each of which offers sets of knowledges, values and codes to be adhered to and / or acknowledged” (*Men and Masculinities* 124). This observation is an important one if we consider Foucault’s notion of truth here, where knowledge is produced and reproduced as it flows dynamically through interstices of power. The workplace, where the male subject spends a disproportionate amount of his time, is saturated with truths that have profound effects on subjectivity. Such knowledges are not solely deployed by the specific institution in which subject is employed, but they circulate amongst the collective body of workers who share the logics that are both embodied within the place of work and which extend to life outside of it.

The organization of one’s life becomes mapped by the constraints of a workday and a workplace, and work provides a concise and easily recognizable label which comes to be a major marker of identity for the worker subject. Even as a subject becomes involved in organizations – such as labour unions -- organizations that contradict the imperatives that are set by the workplace, the subject is all the while submerging himself even deeper into the logics of work through his participation within an organization that is dedicated to understanding and improving the logics of the workplace. As Baudrillard states, “it is always a question of proving the real by the imaginary, proving truth by scandal, proving the law by transgression, proving work by the strike, proving the system by crisis and capital by revolution” (*Simulations* 36). Thus, transgressions against the imaginary – the world of work – are situated within the imaginary itself, perpetuating the illusion that the imaginary is, in fact, the real. The

entire economy of logics which speak against production are thus a part of that same economy – production itself. All of the logics of production and masculinity circulate within the dynamic base; it is at the base that the limits of the superstructure are framed through both participation and subversion. Our speech perpetually circulates around the imaginary and only the imaginary – the omnipresence of fiction banishes the real, and it is fiction which succeeds as the only truth upon which we are able to tread – “the desert of the real itself” (Baudrillard, *Simulations 2*).

The Emergence of Consumption, the Residue of Production: A Simulated Existentialism

Man has stitched himself so tightly into the tapestry of capitalism that the seeds of his speech are still everywhere sewn with the thread of production. The mind of man is not simply lagging in an epoch that has been overcome with the advent of a new temporality, but the shift, if we are to return to the arguments which Baudrillard puts forth in *The Consumer Society*, sees the “culmination” of the “process of rationalization” which was undergone with productive forces in the nineteenth-century (82). Therefore, although new social logics have emerged, in the contemporary period these logics emerge from the same centre which deployed those older logics – capitalism itself.

If we turn once again to Raymond Williams, we find that this nostalgic mentality is to be expected:

A residual culture is usually at some distance from the effective dominant

culture, but one has to recognize that, in real cultural activities, it may get incorporated into it. This is because some part of it, some version of it – and especially if the residue is from some major area of the past – will in many cases have had to be incorporated if the effective dominant culture is to make sense in those areas. (171)

In order for capital to succeed in its new phase, the culture which was constructed from and around the male subject must be incorporated, even if only in words and images, into the new phase of capitalism. As Williams's base is dynamic, and as it sets the limits of the superstructure rather than stringently determining it, the masculinity which men produced in the epoch of production will continue to circulate within the base, sometimes as the past which resides at the limits of this new temporality, and sometimes as the necessary limits towards which man must strive in order to successfully engender himself masculine.

In order to integrate man within consumer society, the market offers as a commodity one of the central tenets that circulated around masculinity in the age of industrialization – the rhetoric of the self-made man. While this rhetoric previously revolved around needs – the man would heroically venture into the public realm, finding a place for himself in order to provide for his family – this rhetoric, embedded within the identity of man to the point that it is recognized as an “essence,” is sold to man in the products, lifestyles, and ideologies that circulate in consumer society. As John Benyon relates in his study of contemporary masculinity, with the advent of consumer society:

‘desires’ replaced ‘needs’ and what people were became increasingly

based upon what they owned. Goods such as houses, clothes, cars, and other indicators of 'success' assumed enormous importance for people's self images. Indeed, in line with the consumerist ethos a number of commodified masculinities are now on offer which men can 'buy into' if they have the resources (whether money, looks, age, or location). (Benyon 14-15)

In a section devoted to the emergence of new forms of masculinities in the 1980s and 1990s (98-121), John Benyon furthers his argument on the replacement of needs with desires and the concurrent commodification of masculinity by listing a number of magazines such as *GQ*, *Attitude*, and *Loaded*, which assist men in fashioning their clothing and attitude in order to differentiate themselves from other men. Whereas the status of the masculine self within the capitalist economy was formerly derived both from his participation within the realm of work and from the rank which he derived from his workplace, it is now through the consumption of commodities that man articulates his status. Thus, the rhetoric of the self-made man is appropriated by the consumer society; individuality and self-fashioning remain central to notions of masculinity, but they are, in this new temporality, available for consumption rather than attainable by production.

While many men become absorbed within consumer society, engendering themselves with the masculinities that are available to them as commodities, rampant consumerism and the commodification of masculinity are at the same time perceived to be the primary factors that have led to the alleged crisis in masculinity (Benyon 2002, Faludi 2000, Whitehead and Barrett 2001, Whitehead 2002). If we return to Baudrillard's phases of the image, we are able to observe the manner in which the

consumer society itself fosters such a crisis. While the second phase of the image saw the masking of a basic reality (capitalist production as the real), in the third phase of the image, it is the “*absence* of a basic reality” that is masked (*Simulations* 11). The fantastical images that are available in the epoch of consumption (eg. the big budget films and celebrity of the culture industry) provide the illusion that that which lies outside of such hyperbole is, in fact, the masculine real.¹¹ The “real” lives of men, however bogged down by the ever-more rapid and thick barrage of mediated messages, are oft conceived to be entrenched within a central context, the drudgery of work. Work is the reality whose edges are always and everywhere surrounded by the “freedom” to consume.

Just as the mediated man shares the realm of consumption (formerly a realm that was associated primarily with women)¹² with his gendered other, the realm of production is becoming less stringently divided; the phallogocentric logics of work are interrupted by the gendered transformations in the public sphere. In order to maintain the logics of gender difference which define the borders of man, there develops a nostalgia for a past (a sexually and hierarchically stratified domain of production) which

¹¹ In order to illustrate this, Baudrillard uses the example of Disneyland, where “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America Surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation” (*Simulations* 25).

¹² In a conference paper entitled “Melville’s ‘Liminal’ Bachelor: A Flexible Vehicle for Social Critique,” Tim Helwig discusses man’s entrance into the realm of consumption through the figure of the “liminal” bachelor, an entrance that was highly criticized in nineteenth-century periodicals as it signified man’s transgression into a realm that was designated feminine.

is already simulacrum. Man wrote his real as production, so it is here that man often returns to find his essence in times of crisis. Work, however, in this new phase, “disappears on the horizon of capital. Here again, the relations are inverted: it is no longer work that serves the reproduction of capital, but capital which produces and reproduces work. A gigantic parody of the relations of production” (Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End* 16). Consumption is for man the performance of the final phases of the image; it is the absorption of his masculinity into pure and inescapable simulation, the misconstruing of the simulacrum of production for the real.

As individuality is offered to man by both commodities and the nostalgic canvas of production, the quest for individuality seems to be the central tenet that emerges from the map of masculinity, offering itself as the real of man. Man’s quest for masculinity, constructed as individuality within consumer society, is reminiscent of Zarathustra’s relentless quest for individuality in Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. While the “last men” in *Zarathustra*, most lucidly described in chapter five of “Zarathustra’s Prologue,” are the masses who would rather pursue universally prescribed and attainable goals than construct their own goals (16-19), Zarathustra attempts to move beyond the constructed abstractions to which the “last men” subscribe, incessantly returning to his cave in order to think independently. The last men in consumer society are the men who would rather purchase their essences through their consumption of easily attainable commodities than fashion their own essences. In *Time as History*, George Grant genders Nietzsche’s theory, pointing out that in a society where success can be realized by all men, the standards for such a success need to be

significantly low. Success in this society, Grant states “can be achieved, but only at the cost of emasculating men of all potentialities for nobility and greatness” (44). The nihilists, interchangeable with “men” in Grant’s theory, “would rather will nothing than have nothing to will” (45) as they understand that the values and norms to which the last men adhere are relative and man-made abstractions that eliminate the possibilities for distinction.

Even as the man in crisis performs Zarathustra’s eternal returns to the cave in order to escape the simulacra of commodified success, however, the cave within which he searches for himself remains situated upon the landscape of simulation; it is the eternal return of a simulated history that prohibits the possibility of the overman. As man refuses to perform the abstraction of consumption in the consumer society, it is the not-so-distant abstraction of production that he seeks to perform as his essence.

Thus, having peeled ourselves down to the depths of the postmodern masculine identity, we find that here (and therefore everywhere) we are always speaking in terms of simulation; there is nothing essential about gender. As we extend ourselves along the lines that Baudrillard has drawn for us, we must always remember that masculinity is merely a map that has been drawn upon the male body. As Judith Butler argues:

Gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practice of gender coherence . . . In this sense, gender is always doing, though not doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed . . . In an application that Nietzsche himself would not have anticipated or condoned, we might state as a corollary: there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that

are said to be its results. (33)

Spoken succinctly by Butler, gender identity is performed. Expressions of gender do not emerge from a subject in a manner that allows us to catch a glimpse of being. Gender identity is always already determined; both its dialogue is scripted, and its stage directions are mapped onto the body of the sexed subject. The Zarathustra-like quest modelled by Nietzsche is itself a performance; the individuality that lies at the centre of man and all of his existential obsessions is simulation.

Baudrillard also illustrates that a society of simulation is inescapable— even through the gravest subversive performances, it is impossible to relocate and tread upon the landscape of the real. Baudrillard orchestrates with his reader a fake hold-up, telling his reader to:

stay close to the “truth,” so as to test the reaction of the apparatus to a perfect simulation. But you won’t succeed: the web of artificial signs will be inextricably mixed up with the real elements (a police officer will really shoot on sight; a bank customer will faint and die of a heart attack; they will really turn the phoney ransom over to you) – in brief, you will unwittingly find yourself immediately in the real, one of whose functions is precisely to devour every attempt at simulation, to reduce everything to some reality – that’s exactly how the established order is, well before institutions and justice come into play (*Simulations* 39).

Applying his example directly to the terrain of gender, we find that even the most extreme of subversive bodily acts— cross dressing¹³— is an infringement upon the law

¹³ In the final chapter of *Gender Trouble*, “Subversive Bodily Acts,” Judith Butler proposes that the most effective means of deconstructing gender is through the practice of dressing in drag. She argues that, “in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency” (175).

which will never be detected by the gender police unless spoken. Even when spoken, such a performance will be treated as transgression, a difference that can only ever act to perpetuate the simulated real. Whether man or woman is transgressive or docile in their performance of gender, it is always the simulated real that is the ultimate performer.

When man can no longer enact his history, he becomes nostalgic and agitated.¹⁴ His nostalgia, however, eludes him into believing that his essence (as self-fashioning producer) is not located in a history – it seems to be swimming alongside him, stroke for stroke. It is for this reason that we must, more than ever, be centrally concerned with “think[ing] of the present historically” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* ix). As Baudrillard states, “facts no longer have any trajectory of their own, they arise at the intersection of the models; a single fact may even be engendered by all the models at once” (32). Man is engendered masculine by the successive models that map his history; he acts them all at once, an impossible anachronism that is the only possibility for his being.

In our first text, we will explore the ways in which man attempts to distinguish himself as masculine within the consumer society. The distinction that is sought in this text, however, is not the one that is provided by the myth of the overman, but by the mythologies that are offered by the consumer society itself. This lack of an outside – of a critical perspective space – is a significant aspect of the postmodern; that consumer society assimilates all other possible modes of life within its logics is a central factor which makes man both nostalgic for a time in which he was able to differentiate himself

¹⁴ I use the word “become” here as this hyper-nostalgia and agitation embeds itself within the being of the frustrated subject.

from other men, and frustrated that this nostalgia seems impossible to enact. By entrenching ourselves within the depths of the consumer society alongside Patrick Bateman, where distinction is, paradoxically, a concern only insofar as it is sought to ensure the successful assimilation of the individual within a collective where all identities are interchangeable, we will be able to observe the properties of the consumer society (and the properties of man within this society) that lead to the more proper (yet still paradoxical) existentialist revolts against the consumer society in the latter two texts that are of concern to our analysis.

Chapter One: From Pastiche to Parody, or, From Saturation to Symptomatology:
Defining the Contours of Postmodern Masculinity in Brett Easton Ellis's
and Mary Harron's *American Psycho*

As the masculinity that this project aims to analyze is framed by a specific moment and set of theories -- the postmodern -- it would seem to be imperative at this point to flesh out the cultural implications of this historically specific masculinity by turning towards a text in which the language of postmodern masculinity can be isolated and analysed: *American Psycho*. The frame of reference which will be of great assistance in extracting the meaning that is both contained within the text and in the controversy that surrounds it will be the apparatus which Fredric Jameson has constructed in order to explain the notion of postmodern culture in the first section of his encyclopedic survey of the landscape of late capitalism in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson's expertise in the area of semiotics shines through in his analysis of postmodern culture, and it is this theoretical awareness, along with the manner in which he readily applies the models which he constructs to postmodern texts (Andy Warhol's paintings, John Portman's architecture) that makes his work both an intellectual and a practical guide to analyzing the otherwise confusing structure and substance of the postmodern text. In order to better understand the structures that are at play in both Brett Easton Ellis's novel and Mary Harron's film -- structures whose differences, I argue, account for the different reception of the texts -- the linguistic apparatus employed by the postmodern text will be of primary concern to my analysis.

What emerges from the progression of the novel to its film adaptation is an archetypal man that Tim Edwards (1997) and Sean Nixon (1996) call the new man, a narcissistic consumer that emerged as the marker of yuppie culture in the latter half of the 1980's. He was a man, described in both accounts, who was concerned with his body, health, clothes, expensive cars and accessories, and, most significantly, he was an ambitious careerist driven by the need to accumulate capital in order to flaunt his status in the form of purchased commodities and access to exclusive venues. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Jean Baudrillard speaks of the manner in which political economy -- today a simulation scripted in the language of commodities -- has become the *real* (an obscene reality that operates by means of a logical and calculated code that obscures its more radical implications and effects), or, “the sign’s referential” in contemporary society (31), he argues for the “necessity of resurrecting and dramatizing political economy in the form of a movie script, to screen out the threat of symbolic destruction” (32).

I will begin my analysis, however, by exploring Brett Easton Ellis’s novel in order to outline the characteristics and contours (or lack thereof) of the postmodern. While this initial step dances around the notion of masculinity in the postmodern, it is only once the postmodern is understood that its characteristics will assist us in better understanding the properties and implications of a postmodern masculinity, an aspect of the text that finds itself burnt into film in Mary Harron’s adaptation. While the masculinity depicted in Mary Harron’s film is postmodern, it sits within a context – a language and a style -- that is something other than the new cultural logic

(postmodernism) that sweeps through every aspect of the novel. In other words, there is an outside where Mary Harron's adaptation of the text is concerned, a set of discernible norms that make the text a statement about the postmodern (specifically, a postmodern masculinity) rather than an exhibition of the postmodern itself. While Ellis's text is a portrait of the postmodern, Harron's adaptation turns toward the satirical impulse of parody in order to critique the dangerous masculinity that Brett Easton Ellis portrays in his novel.

As Jameson aptly points out to his readers, the shift into the postmodern is largely signaled by a new aesthetics of writing in which referentiality becomes confused; it becomes a part of the text itself rather than an element that resides outside of it. One of the primary differences between the modernist and postmodernist text is the way in which the cultural artifacts of the masses are textualized. High modernist texts boasted a style of writing that would put popular dialects and artifacts within quotes, placing modernism upon a pedestal, necessarily high. This effectively divorced high modernist texts from the commonality of the masses; the masses were customarily shoved into and outside of the text's margins as referents that conferred (with their unsavoury cultural differences) meaning upon the signs that constituted the substance of the text. The postmodernist text, on the other hand, is "fascinated precisely by this whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitch, of TV series and *Reader's Digest* culture, of advertising and motels . . . materials they no longer simply 'quote,' as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 2-3). In the postmodern text, then, the real of the masses is no longer

bracketed by “quotes;” it is no longer treated as a phenomenon that resides outside of the text as a referent. This stylistic element of the postmodern text, a gesture as simple as incorporating the cultures of the masses within the text rather than treating them with disdain, amounts to the opening of floodgates and the blurring of boundaries. By refusing to impose boundaries upon its landscape, the postmodern text is situating itself in the heart of what would *appear* to be the real -- the text no longer makes proclamations that would expose and lift the blanket of abstraction that covers the real -- the postmodern text accepts the “reality” of simulacra and weaves itself into its simulation; it is, therefore, the hyperreal. As stringently defined boundaries no longer separate the cultural artifact from its referents, there is no outside to the postmodern text. Unlike the texts of high modernism, the postmodern text is not interested in divorcing itself from the cultural practices of the masses in order to suggest an imaginary (and more “admirable”) alternative.

A Text without an Outside

In *American Psycho*, Brett Easton Ellis employs an aesthetics of writing that might be described as having no “outside.” This is true for two reasons. First, there is no hint of a redemptive language at the margins¹ of the text to which one can turn in order to counterbalance the significations spoken by its dominant tongue, Patrick Bateman. The society within which he is submerged speaks the same language that he does,

¹ I use the word margins here in order to refer to marginal characters or themes which might run counter to the dominant characters. In the novel, there are none.

concerned only with sparkling and spectacular surfaces, a circulating system of commodities. It is not only Patrick who is concerned with his appearance (in the form of the clothes he dons and the products he uses to accentuate it) and the venues which he must frequent in order to be seen: this is the central concern for all of the characters in the novel. This is a society which is wholly obsessed by surface, without exception.

This brings us to the second feature that marks the text as one that has no outside: the specificity of the commodities that grace the pages of the novel. As Patrick prepares to attend a black-tie party in the evening, he lists his friends in the same breath as he does the clothes that he plans to wear for the event:

There's a black-tie party at the puck building tonight for a new brand of computerized professional rowing machine, and after playing squash with Fredrick Dribble I have drinks at Harry's with Jamie Conway, Kevin Wynn and Jason Gladwin, and we hop into the limousine Kevin rented for the night and take it uptown. I'm wearing a wing-collared jaquard waistcoat by Kilgour, French & Stanbury from Barney's, a silk bow-tie from Saks, patent-leather slip-ons by Baker-Benjes, antique diamond studs from Kentshire Galleries and a gray wool silk-lined coat with drop sleeves and a button-down collar by Luciano Soprani. An ostrich wallet from Bosca carries four hundred dollars cash in the back pocket of my black wool trousers. Instead of my Rolex I'm carrying a fourteen-karat gold watch from H. Stearn. (126)

These are real brand names, part of both the text and the society to which it is referring - a society which the text absorbs and becomes by obsessively subsuming its finest details. Dropping the names of his prestigious friends with the same zeal as he does the prestigious brand names of the attire that he dons, it is not the brand names -- of the real world -- that become fictional, but the fictional characters that become real. As the lines between text and context are blurred, it is not fiction that is transcribed on the pages of

the text, but the hyperreal: a simulation which, in spite of its not being real at all, is not “enveloped by an imaginary;” it is not only “a liquidation of a referentials,” it is worse: it is the “artificial resurrection [of referentials] in systems of signs” (*Simulations* 3-4). In other words, it constitutes the adoption of a constructed abstraction (in this case, a hyper-commodified society) as reality. If these brands, falling in the domain of high fashion, are alien to the reader, we need only to scan over Patrick’s description of his apartment (watching MTV on the thirty-inch television set from Toshiba in his Ralph Lauren boxers, another set -- superior by one-inch -- in the bedroom from Panasonic, a Toshiba VCR) (25-26), as well as his morning routine (in which we encounter Plax, Listerine, Cepacol, Vidal Sassoon, Redken, Vivagen) (26-27), his taste in music (U2, Huey Lewis and the News, Whitney Houston, the more commercial works of Phil Collins and Genesis), and an ever-expanding list of mind-altering prescription and recreational drugs (Xanax, Valium, Halcion, cocaine, speed, ecstasy); all of these objects provide virtually any reader with a list of commodities that is undoubtedly of -- and common to -- their world.

Pulling us even deeper into the realm of the real, ironically, is the appearance of Tom Cruise -- a “real” celebrity -- in the elevator with Patrick. His presence within the text pulls us out of the comfort of fiction, and right into reality. Tom Cruise *is* the real, not a fictional name-drop like so many other of the friends who merit a mention from Patrick. The irony is that he is a person who is most often seen through another medium -- never in the flesh -- and he is usually seen performing a role that would enshroud him in fiction. Patrick Bateman, however, has the privilege of meeting him in the flesh, a

“privilege” that is not shared by many of the readers of his confession. His world, then, in some ways, would seem to be even more real than our own.²

These stylistic marks remind us of Jameson’s contrast of Van Gogh’s peasant shoes with Andy Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes*. Van Gogh’s painting centres upon a pair of broken-in work boots that have presumably been thrown into a dark, grey corner after a toilsome (yet routine) day of work. Warhol’s painting, on the other hand, signals to the end of style with its indifference; it is a collage of high-heeled shoes on a film negative sprinkled with gold dust. While Van Gogh’s shoes stand in for “the whole rudimentary human world of backbreaking peasant toil” (*Postmodernism* 7) -- the painting has a referent that lends significance to the symbolic language on the canvas -- of Andy Warhol’s shoes, Jameson says that “nothing in this painting organizes even a minimal place for the viewer, who confronts it at the turning of a museum corridor or gallery with all the contingency of some inexplicable natural object” (8). In *American Psycho* we do not only see *a world* through the eyes of Patrick Bateman, it is *our world* that confronts us, a whole string of objects, names, and places that we encounter on a daily basis.

Brett Easton Ellis is explicit about his aim to blur the lines that would divide reality from fiction, a position that is foregrounded in his choice of a passage from

² We also meet U2 on stage (146-148). Unlike his more intimate encounter with Tom Cruise, however, U2 is in full stage attire, performing their personas, making this experience less significant than Patrick’s meeting of Tom Cruise in Patrick’s own apartment building. We relate to the description of Bono and the Edge (their attire and stage presence described by Patrick) based on performances that are readily available to us both at live concerts and on television. It is a matter of aura and Patrick’s experiences seem, in the novel, to be even more authentic than our own.

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* as an epigraph:

Both the author of these *Notes* and the *Notes* themselves are, of course, fictional. Nevertheless, such persons as the composer of these *Notes* not only exist in our society, but indeed must exist, considering the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed. I have wished to bring before the public, somewhat more distinctly than usual, one of the characters of our recent past. He represents a generation that is still living out its days among us. In the fragment entitled "Underground" this personage describes himself and his views and attempts, as it were, to clarify the reasons why he appeared and was bound to appear in our midst. The subsequent fragment will consist of the actual "notes," concerning certain events in his life. (qtd in Ellis iii)

Although Ellis's use of the epigraph states, even before we enter the text, that Patrick Bateman is a fictional character, the epigraph also suggests, everywhere beyond its first sentence, that what is transcribed in the coming pages is, if not reality itself, a representation of that very reality. As the epigraph progresses, it pushes itself ever further into the depths of reality, finally stating that the text in question will consist of "actual 'notes,'" a statement that seems to suggest that what follows is not a fictional account. If we do, however, accept that the text is a representation that has some special sort of historicity about it, it would be this: Patrick Bateman is a character who represents the yuppie male population in New York in the late 1980's, a character who was very much "among us" when Ellis's novel was published in 1991. If we are to follow the epigraph as instruction, however, what follows is a narrative in which Patrick Bateman "describes himself and his views" and, by the end of the narrative, we should be able to discern "the reasons why he appeared and was bound to appear in our midst." The epigraph, then, acts as an initial moment of "outside" for the text; it is a note of

instruction for the reader, a set of directions that points the reader to the text's allegorical path. It is the text's documentary realist style, however, that obscures its allegorical impulse, making it feel as though Patrick is a "real" threat who enacts a "real" violence upon the social.

The epigraph becomes particularly interesting when it is considered in juxtaposition with the "real" disclaimer which Ellis has mounted on the proceeding page:

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, incidents, and dialogue, except for incidental references to public figures, products, or services, are imaginary and are not intended to refer to any living persons or to disparage any company's products or services. (i)

When we encounter the passage by Dostoevsky, then, we have already been told that the novel and its characters are fictional. When we are confronted with an epigraph that suggests that there are elements of reality within the text, we have already been told by the initial disclaimer that the text does not intend "to refer to any living persons." What we are left with, as elements of reality, are references to "public figures, products, or services." That these elements of reality are such that they can be wholly -- without altering their form -- subsumed within fiction while a "living person" cannot is perhaps the first "real" indication of why a character like Patrick Bateman "appeared and was bound to appear in our midst." In a lengthy reflection, Patrick spews out a string of signifiers -- intelligence, reason, desire, justice, fear, recrimination, sympathy, guilt, waste, failure, grief -- all seemingly dead concepts and emotions "that no one really felt anymore . . . surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in" (375).

These concepts, crucial to the metaphysical genealogy of mankind are lost on Patrick, given marginal mention here in a narrative that otherwise consists of a catalogue of commodities.

As far as any kind of substantial self goes, Patrick tells his readers that:

. . . . there is an idea of Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: I simply am not there. It is hard for me to make sense on any given level. Myself is fabricated, an aberration. I am a noncontingent human being. My personality is sketchy and unformed, my heartlessness goes deep and is persistent . My conscience, my pity, my hopes disappeared a long time ago (probably at Harvard) if they ever did exist . . . and coming face-to-face with these truths, 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 for me to tell you any of this. This confession has meant *nothing*. . . . (376-377)

Patrick is, as Jameson tells us of Fargo Court (a free-standing wall of windows in Los Angeles), “a surface which seems to be unsupported by any volume” (*Postmodernism* 13), a new surface which “renders our older systems of perception . . . somehow archaic and aimless, without offering another in their place” (15). Patrick Bateman is flesh without the depth that one would expect of reality. There is virtually nothing that can be learned from his speech, only that he exists without existing. He emblemizes a new type of text where any type of depth-analysis – an analysis of his internal motivations – would be futile and misguided; aside from the possibility of sensing that he shares a common lifestyle with a select group in society, there is no sense to be made of Patrick “on any given level,” on any level beyond trivial commonalities.

Brett Easton Ellis's ultimate objective in writing *American Psycho* is something that we can once again flesh out by turning to an example provided by Fredric Jameson in his analysis of the culture of the postmodern. When considering Duane Hanson's sculptures "Museum Guard" and "Tourist II," exhibits so real and appropriate to the venue of the museum that they blend themselves into reality rather than remaining on the other side of a divide that is reserved for works of art, Jameson notes that the:

moment of doubt and hesitation as to the breath and warmth of these polyester figures . . . tends to return upon the real human beings moving about you in the museum and to transform them also for the briefest moment into so many dead and flesh-coloured simulacra in their own right. The world thereby loses its depth and threatens to become a glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, a rush of images without density. (34)

In *American Psycho*, the attention that is given to minutiae -- the cataloguing of every commodity in sight from furniture to dress -- creates a landscape that blends into the real. The characters who speak about these commodities -- primarily Patrick -- are dressed in the same clothes and frequent the same venues as the very real population in New York upon which they are based. The effect, while not as immediate as the effect that Jameson situates within the museum, is that the men who circulate the streets of New York lose their depth; they become the glossy (or Kilgour, French & Stanbury) skin which they sport, "a rush of images without density." While Jameson's example is aimed at describing the visual / spatial effect that Hanson's exhibit enacts upon the "real human beings" who are strolling through the museum, Ellis's "exhibition" is not entirely different; the exhaustive description that the novel provides, along with the

venues where one can expect to find these characters, acts to collapse the divide between reality and fiction to such an extent that it becomes difficult to assign depth to the real human beings who frequent these venues and wear these clothes upon encountering them in the real (fictional?) space which they inhabit.³

The danger of the text, and the controversy that was born upon its being published, arises when this aggressive realism collides with the fantastical and the grotesque. Carla Freccero, in her article entitled “Historical Violence, Censorship, and the Serial Killer: The Case of *American Psycho*,” explains why Patrick Bateman’s assumption of the identity of a serial killer is so controversial. Speaking about the conventional role of the serial killer, Freccero notes that

The serial killer is a popular American figure of dementia, universally regarded as unthreatening precisely because of his singularity, the nonrationality of his pathology, and the individualized and eccentric nature of his violence. A serial killer is not the oppressed masses, and although his murders are usually lurid, his reach is limited . . . Through the serial killer, then, we recognize and simultaneously refuse the violence-saturated quality of the culture, by situating its source in an individual with a psychosexual dysfunction. We are thus able to locate violence in his disorder rather than in ourselves or the social order. (48)

Ellis’s serial killer is not written into this conventional path. Ellis cleanses the social slate of any possibility for individuality; if one thing is clear in the novel it is that Patrick Bateman is “simply not there.” Patrick lacks the depth that would make him

³ Sean Nixon describes an experience of this sort in the epilogue to his study on men in consumer society entitled *Hard Looks: Masculinity, Spectatorship and Contemporary Consumption*. Edwards explains that reading of *American Psycho* concurrent to the research and writing of his study resulted in a chilling experience in which he could have sworn that Patrick Bateman brushed by him in Soho (241).

real: the psychosis which he exhibits is, like all else in the society that is described, an aspect of the surface. Patrick's psychosis, therefore, cannot be attributed to an individually dysfunctional depth – an expression of the internal – but must necessarily be a symptom inherent in the social order, something which sets itself upon Patrick's skin.

Ellis's stylistic decisions make the text controversial. Due to his use of a postmodern aesthetics his text does not have a line of flight – an outside in the form of a normative or redemptive voice. Carla Freccero argues that the most aggressive opposition to which the text fell prey, accusations by the Los Angeles Chapter of the National Organization for Women that the novel amounted to an instruction manual for the murder and dismemberment of women, "is not atypical of public culture's responses to popular cultural artifacts" (50). As Freccero notes, when it comes to popular texts, "representation is construed as advocacy, and figuration is construed as performativity" (50). This is the major crux that plagues the postmodern text when it is given to interpretation; a text that does not have an outside does not boast a moralizing tag that would clarify its ends. The stylistic element that is most significant in this respect is pastiche. As Jameson says of pastiche, it is

like parody, the imitation of a particular or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some linguistic normality still persists (*Postmodernism* 17).

With *American Psycho*, Brett Easton Ellis chose to write in a particular style, with the

linguistic mask of the yuppie population in late eighties New York. The text is not endowed with an outside voice that would suggest a linguistic norm -- a normative voice that would act as a moral balance for the obscenity and vanity of yuppie-speak -- but is saturated everywhere with the significations of the yuppie population which he has decided to represent. Coupled with the lack of a linguistic norm, his novel, published in 1991, does not fall far from the object of its gaze and mimicry. Beyond this, Ellis was the same age as Patrick Bateman, 28, and living in New York at the time of the book's publication. In an interview with Jamie Clark, Ellis even admits that he "identified with Patrick Bateman initially because in a lot of ways he was like me. He was young, he was successful, he lived a certain kind of lifestyle, and so in that respect I saw him often as myself. That's why I consider the novel autobiographical" (par. 71). Taking all of these factors into consideration, it becomes extremely difficult to locate any form of outside where the novel is concerned, a critical distance that would be necessary in order to bring out the satire that is implicitly embedded within the text, yet not expressed by an authorial voice or referential norm. The moral condemnation of the novel is a result of the text's lack of an outside; there is, as a result, no place to judge the novel from within.

Filming an Outside for the Postmodern

Mary Harron's filmic adaptation contains virtually all of the limits which Ellis's novel lacks. As a director who has already taken on feminist issues (*I Shot Andy Warhol*), Harron's feminist vision provides a welcome gloss to an otherwise

dangerously misogynist novel, regardless of the novel's aims. Released in 2000, the film is written in a dead language and is therefore not bogged down by the curse of immediacy. Although it is spoken and stylized with the mask of a dead era -- its appearance and speech is reminiscent of a decade passed -- Harron's film is not pastiche; it is, rather, that older form of parody which gives in to the satirical impulse. Rather than being presented as a postmodern text, the film is a meeting of two genres -- black comedy and horror -- resulting in an adaptation that is too fantastical to be immediately real, an odd blend of the hilarious and the horrific. As much of the cataloguing that filled the pages of the book had to be cut in order to make the text manageable for adaptation, Patrick's voice becomes less prominent and the voices that persist on the fringes of his monologues -- particularly those of his female victims -- become audible. While we are able to learn about the properties of the postmodern from Ellis's text -- everything blends together in a manner that would make the isolation of a specific element for the purposes of analysis artificial -- with Harron's adaptation there are referential "outsides" in the form of authorial intent, the audible female voice, and recognizable generic features. It is, therefore, possible to isolate the properties of the specific masculinity which this film portrays, a postmodern masculinity surrounded everywhere within the new text by aspects of the postmodern, but which is spoken without the confusion (the boundlessness and blending) that is characteristic of the postmodernist text.

Mary Harron's vision in adapting the novel to film is significant if we are to consider the status and genre of the film as markers for the extraction of meaning. With

the film, Harron wished to “bring out the satire in the book and save it from its reputation” (DVD “Featurette”). For Harron, then, satire is the key to “saving” the novel; if the book is to be saved from the condemnations that would overshadow its significance, it is the too latent satire that must surface and become more evidently manifest in the film adaptation: a becoming parody of the pastiche. The central object of the novel’s satire, for Harron, is masculinity; the novel is, to her, “a savage portrait of male behavior at its worst”(DVD “Featurette”).

Harron’s isolation of masculinity as the ultimate object of the text’s satire is evident in the way in which she lays out the film. While women in the novel are as mesmerized by surfaces as men are, Harron eliminates this equivalency – this blending – by suppressing the female voices that speak of surface and accentuating instead articulations that suggest that there is a depth within the feminine. This approach isolates masculinity; masculinity becomes a prominent eye-sore, an object that sticks out due to its relative shape: its two-dimensionality. Instances such as Courtney’s melancholic expression of a desire to have children, or Jean’s serious speculation about her life -- her stating of individual desires like traveling and going back to school – come to represent women within the film, at the same time as women’s obsessions with restaurant reservations, furniture and fashion are virtually eliminated. Meanwhile, the only man who exhibits any kind of stir below his surface is Luis. Yet his repressed homosexuality (his hidden *desire* for men) marks him as something confusingly other than man; he is awkward in his performance of masculinity because, for him, there actually *is* something below his surface. Unlike the other men in the film, he does not

simply cover over an inner void with the purchase of an essence through commodities.

Also absent from Harron's adaptation is the language that is everywhere blended with commodities in Ellis's text, a language that Jameson would call schizophrenic -- a language in which "the links of the signifying chain snap" resulting in "a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers" (*Postmodernism* 26)-- a blending of a plethora of commodities without a stable venue: commodities floating in space without a ground.⁴ Harron instead textualizes this schizophrenia in a more conventional form, filming sequences that fall into two distinct genres -- black comedy and horror -- in order to segregate a male psyche whose disorders are less confused, more easily discernible. While Patrick, in the book, never stops listing commodities, in the film he is either psychotic *or* vain. The omissions from the adaptation are significant: when Patrick has sex with Courtney in the film, he does not start rummaging through and evaluating the cosmetics which he finds in Luis's medicine cabinet (102), nor does he excitedly describe the brand names that grace his torturous instruments as he mutilates his victims. The result is a language that is less confused, one in which a cause / effect relationship between consumption and masculine brutality becomes plausible. As there is no separation between these two elements in the novel; there can be no precession -- one does not come before the other -- consumption and brutality are always simultaneous and they are, therefore, a singular entity. If the structure of language is

⁴ While Jameson speaks specifically of the temporal aspects of a schizophrenic language -- a series of disjointed times whose blending results in a perpetual present -- I have opted here to appropriate his theory in order to explore the confusing spatial effects of a language which is constituted of an indiscriminate blending of commodities.

based upon a system of difference that persists between signifiers within a signifying chain, in the postmodern text these differences are drowned as the chain becomes a sea of signifiers, all commodities. The result: we lose the ability to extract meaning. We cannot be objective because the language does not allow us to get a subjective foothold; we cannot assume the stance to which we are accustomed because it is the text's nature to engulf us and then sweep us away. The reader will inevitably drown within this vast sea of signifiers, a sea in which there is no set pattern to swim and, once submerged, there is no skin (a dividing line between inside and out) to swim back up to. It is a language with no escape -- a viscous sea to swim. In the film, however, the sea is a burden that is by and for man -- women are not so prominent and are of a different mind than the men in the film -- and it is man who swims and speaks this sea, its very substance pouring from his pores (he is saturated by and speaks commodities). All of this becomes a cycle without an outside: his language becomes his burden and his burden becomes his language.⁵

The female voice, in the film, constitutes an outside-- an island in the midst of the sea-- an *other* language which floats upon the sea, independent of it yet altered by its waves and wetness. With the female voice we see that there is still a voice that speaks in terms of desire. It is a voice (I'm thinking of Jean in Patrick's apartment, here) that realizes that there *is* a now, a present moment in which there are choices rather than a chaotic blur of images and objects that must be purchased and performed in order to, as

⁵ This is, as will be explored at greater length below, the functioning of the dynamic base as theorized by Raymond Williams.

Patrick says when speaking of his desires with Evelyn, “just fit in.”

The Gothic and the Postmodern

Just fitting in, however, still proves to be unsatisfactory to Patrick. While he performs excruciatingly tedious and drawn-out routines in order to fit in, as Alex E. Blazer points out, the psychosis that drives Patrick to mutilate women is more than a venting of rage and assertion of control (10). Blazer argues that Patrick “dismembers the ‘hard bodies’ of women to experience the real life-blood flow out” (10), an argument that suggests that there is a depth that exists somewhere below Patrick’s two-dimensionality. In an article entitled “Parodied to Death: The Postmodern Gothic of *American Psycho*,” Ruth Heyler addresses some of the stylistic attributes that would place the contemporary text within the gothic genre. While Heyler does an excellent job of providing a context for the text by way of exposing and explaining its generic conventions, the cultural implications -- which she fails to explore -- are the most interesting in assigning *American Psycho* to the gothic genre. By considering this text alongside the gothic tradition that flourished in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries we are able to make better sense of the cultural significance of the thematics that are central to *American Psycho*. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s argument about imagery of the surface in the gothic novel is particularly interesting in this respect. Sedgwick argues that “the veil that conceals and inhibits sexuality comes by the same gesture to represent it, both as metonym of the thing covered and as a metaphor for the system of prohibitions by which sexual desire is enhanced and specified” (256). We are able to

extend this phenomenon to what Heyler calls the “postmodern gothic” in *American Psycho*, a text that is as obsessed with, and in which all meaning is ascribed to, surface. Patrick mutilates women in the novel, not only, as Blazer suggests, to observe the sea of “real life-blood” flowing from his victims; he actually penetrates into the gashes and slits which he has cut into his victims with his penis, an action that signifies a savage desire for depth. What Patrick discovers, however, is that there is nothing that resides below the veil of toned flesh and lavish garments. In spite of his constant phallic search for meaning, his attempts to locate meaning are always met by the same upset, that “surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in” (375). That clothing and bodies operate metonymically suggests that even when one penetrates to deeper levels in a search for significance, all that will ever be discovered is that same surface; there is nothing to be found in Ellis’s society but bodies and brands.

If this metonym is at the same time a metaphor for a system that enhances and specifies desires, we are moving towards an explicit cultural critique. It would be helpful to once again turn to the gothic of the late eighteenth-century in order to flesh out the significance of this device. The most helpful comparison that can be made between the Gothic and the postmodern traditions is one that centres upon the effects of dominant cultures upon the masses who abide by their logics. In an essay that explores the issues that surrounded the emergence of the gothic tradition, Peter Brooks notes that:

the precondition of the ethical universe explored by Lewis⁶ is

⁶ Matthew Lewis, esq., a pioneer of the gothic tradition whose novel *The Monk* was at the centre of extreme controversy for nearly a decade due to its graphic

Enlightenment secularism, the decision that man should be understood in terms of man alone. The Gothic novel, as its best historians and critics have recognized, stands in reaction to the pretensions of rationalism, . . . [as a] search to discover within, beneath, beyond the phenomenal world larger occult issues and spiritual forces. Yet these writers all discover that reaction against the secularization of the world cannot take a form of resacralization.” (249-250)

The gothic genre, then, in its beginnings, was a reaction against established norms and forces which ignored or repressed some of the larger issues that were at stake in society. Rather than resolving the issues which they chose to explore, the texts critiqued the dominant culture by means of an hyperbolized exploration of that which was neglected, that which resided below and beyond the scientific ordering of things. Similarly, *American Psycho* comes into being as the result of the emergence and reign of a quantified and objectifying culture. The dangerous ground from which the novel springs is consumer capitalism. Patrick is always looking for something deeper in his culture but the aggressive masculinity that he employs in order to delve below an unfulfilling surface, like the resacralization in the Gothic of the Enlightenment, is not the key that would open the door to depth.

A Yuppie Mas(k)culinity

This is where Harron’s adaptation, with its isolation of the masculine as monstrous, departs most explicitly from the social critique of the novel. In the novel, Patrick’s violent hypermasculinity emerges as a return to an old dominant culture that is

depictions of murder and rape in an Italian monastery at the hands of Ambrosio, a devout monk.

at war with a newly emergent dominant culture. The emergent consumer culture, however, absorbs the residual language of a formerly dominant masculinity in an unprecedented manner, not just by speaking its signifiers at the margins of its logic, but by operating under the logic of excess, making any type of monstrosity -- the surpassing of limits -- an impossibility. Therefore, the masculinity that was dominant in the age of production still has a place within consumer society, yet, although the properties of this masculinity are able to persist, its implications and effects are muted (or, castrated). As society operates by means of excess, there is no outside and there can be, therefore, no possibility of distinction; it is distinction that Patrick seeks in exhibiting his new bone (phallus?) business card and it is an absent depth that he seeks with his phallic penetration of female flesh. This aggressive (and regressive) masculinity is, therefore, a phenomenon that is bolstered by the constant frustration of absorption, and absorption is a process that makes the distinction which Patrick seeks impossible. In Harron's text, however, there is an outside to a hypercommodified society in the rationality of the female voice. While masculinity is a postmodern phenomenon in the film -- the male subject blends with all of his surrounding objects -- the fact that women are not subject to this same metonymic contagion suggests that it is a problem in man that leads to this monstrosity: one *can* be immune to the ills of a hyper-commodified society. This adaptation -- a parody that mockingly laughs at the masculine monster that is now in our midst -- presents to us the feminine as an outside, as an element where there is the possibility of a real outside of the laughter. While this adaptation underscores the severe misogyny that fills the pages of the novel (it presents this monstrous masculinity in a

parodic manner), it also alludes to the possibility of an outside within the system of objectification. To suggest that the female is an outside to this system of obscenity is either to suggest that the female body is immune to the ideology that governs men within consumer society, or, that the feminine *does* have that special depth that Patrick savagely sought but could never find within the bodies of his female victims in the novel. Patrick's search, in fact, is a sensational one in that it is physical rather than intellectual or spiritual, and his attempts to locate depth are tied to viewing such movies as *Inside Lydia's Ass*⁷ and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* as instruction manuals. Thus, with the film, due to the relative distance of the feminine from the logic of consumer society, a crisis in capital is transformed into a crisis in masculinity.

If we are to explore the reason behind the relative distance of the feminine from the grounds of consumer capitalism, perhaps there is a truth to this outside. In both the novel and the film, men are the medium through which women gain access to a hypercommodified society. That women are secretaries and girlfriends signifies that they are appendages upon the male body which is completely immersed within the system of consumer society. Even though there has been a shift that sees man sharing the realm of consumption that was formerly occupied almost exclusively by women, both texts (although the insinuations are stronger in Harron's adaptation) point to a masculinity that is wholly immersed within the logics of consumer society. While production is downplayed (what is it that Patrick does at work but discuss the proper

⁷ It is because both women in *Inside Lydia's Ass* are blonde that he is so adamant about getting a blonde woman from the escort service he calls after picking up a prostitute.

modes of consumption?), it is perhaps a new mode of production that is being suggested by the texts: the production of the rules of consumption. The productive base, in this case, operates in the dynamic fashion that Raymond Williams suggests in “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory:” by constructing dominant cultures through the perpetual circulation of discourses between a select number of pointed organizations. Thus, Harron has not displaced the problematics of consumer society by tipping the scales of burden onto the side of man; she has merely pointed to a subjectivity that is (or, *was*: we are talking of a pastiche, or, speech within a dead language, here) more susceptible to the metonymic contagion of consumer capital as man is perpetually producing and consuming the signifiers of consumer society due to the structural organization of his life – his daily instruction upon consumption, and his evenings during which he applies the logics which he has learned throughout the day.

American Psycho is a text whose principal (and only character) is a political economy whose effects have obliterated the symbolic order: nothing is left but the language which circulates in order to perpetuate this system. As Harron’s adaptation makes clear with its isolation of masculinity in an otherwise confusing and chaotic cataloguing of commodities, man has become saturated within the realm of consumption due to his production and obsessive use of a language that legitimizes his shift into a realm that was formerly reserved for the feminine. While man plays out his existence on the level of the hyperreal, the female voice, due to its relative distance from this perpetually circulating set of signifiers, is an outside which puts the masculine hyperreality into quotes; the feminine exists as a viable and desirable model of the non-

simulated real. The text's redemption comes from its new satirical impulse, an impulse which parodies the hyperreal rather than simply becoming it, ridiculing the domain which man stitched himself into in order to maintain a position of dominance in spite of his shift into a domain that was traditionally associated with the feminine.

Chapter 2: Traversing the Time and Space of the Masculine Fringe:
Masculinity and Nostalgia in George Walker's *The End of Civilization*

Ultimately, things have never functioned socially, but symbolically, magically, irrationally, etc. Which implies the formula: capital is a defiance of society. That is to say that this perspective, this panoptic machine, this machine of truth, of rationality, of productivity which is capital, is without objective finality, without reason: it is above all a violence . . . There is no contract, no contract is ever exchanged between distinct agencies according to the law – that is all sound and fury – there are only ever stakes, defiances, that is to say something which does not proceed via a “social relation.” (Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*)

After having spent some time immersed within a text that lacks an outside, the aim of this chapter is precisely to consider the implications of a text which documents a man's struggle to locate and live in a space that falls outside of the emergent (and dominant) logics of consumer society. Rather than forging a viable alternative to the workings of capital, however, Henry, the tragic anti-hero of George Walker's *End of Civilization*, attempts to reinstate the capitalist logics that deceitfully spoke of man as a venerable and noble creature in the age of production. That Henry's speech, though hyperbolic, is not unlike many of the male voices that speak of the contemporary crisis in masculinity – particularly those of the masculinist social scientists that we encountered in the Introduction – signifies that his voice and concerns do not really represent an outside to contemporary masculinity, they are merely another aspect of a confused and complex postmodern identity.

George Walker's *The End of Civilization* documents a married couple's downward spiral from the structured and comprehensible society of production into the

void of consumer society. The society of consumption operates without limits: it is not structured like the society of production was, where time and space were centred around the permanent fixtures and logics of the workplace and the home. Consumer society operates chaotically: the only certainty in such a society is that everything is commodified – including time, space, and subjectivity. In Walker’s play, Henry and Lily leave their children and home as Henry continues a seemingly endless search for work. Although Henry “made a contract with the world and obeyed the rules and stipulations of that contract,” he finds that, in the present society, “all the rules of the game are suspended” (256). Following Jean Baudrillard’s argument, however, there never was a contract only a “defiance” deployed by the “machine of truth” which, for Baudrillard, is capital (69). It is the structure and dynamic working of capital as a process that plays an integral part in determining the structure of relations. That capital is a *process* signifies that, in spite of the illusion of contractual obligations between subjects and institutions, there is no guarantee of stability; contracts with the institutions of capital are a form of micro (rather than macro) stability.

In the age of production Henry was socialized as labour power. Rather than accepting the advent of a new era, Henry misreads his prior socialization as a contract and is disgruntled by the breaching of promises that were offered to men in the productive age of modernity. This is a misrecognition of the micro as macro. Henry’s specific contract did not only provide him with work, but also engendered him with an identity. That such contracts operate at the micro level signifies that there can never be any stability where identity is concerned. In other words, although identity is implicitly

embedded in such contracts, it is not a guaranteed stability. Walker's play follows Henry on his search for meaning amidst the chaos of commodification. His journey is an existential one. But, rather than searching for an individual essence, Henry tries to relocate the essence of his lost masculinity – an essence that was inextricably linked to the capitalist mode of production, but which has been lost along with the logics of that era. As capitalism is a system that operates symbolically rather than socially, Henry's quest is a search for a chain of dead signifiers, signifiers which are "magically" losing their ability to signify as capital moves into its newer phase of consumption. Thus, unlike Patrick Bateman, rather than allowing himself to become immersed within a dense sea of commodities, Henry is searching for an outside to consumer society. While factory work is still, even if only on the fringes, an existent mode of life, that it exists upon the fringes of society suggests that a search for any dominant form of identity within this space must necessarily have lost its dominant status. Such an identity can only exist upon temporal fringes – of a time that has virtually been passed – and upon spatial fringes – outside of both the urban and the suburban. While such an identity can be located and maintained, it lacks the temporal and spatial location – a centrality – that would make it a dominant culture. As dominance is a central aspect of the identity itself, man's experience of this identity can only be fragmented. Crisis, therefore, is a realization of, and a reaction against, the decentring of dominance; crisis manifests itself as a push to reinstate an identity whose central desire – to be at the centre – has been castrated due to its temporal and spatial displacement.

The Vestiges of the Simulacrum of Production: Life in the Suburban Motel

Central to *The End of Civilization* is its setting in a room in a suburban motel,¹ a room that is, as actor Daniel De Raey puts it, “a stopover between yesterday and tomorrow, assuming (and don’t assume too glibly) that today can be survived” (4). It is a setting that exists on the fringes of both time and place, a temporary space that would never resemble a home. The civilization that is ending upon Henry and Lily’s entrance into the motel is the era of production with its structured temporal and spatial logics, where the family unit has a permanent dwelling that exists outside of the structured day of work as a haven for man’s return. Walker accentuates the transition away from structured permanence through Lily’s laments upon their departure from a home that they are about to lose, and their children which they have had to abandon to relatives due to Henry’s relentless search for work – the now seemingly unlocatable centre of that old structured permanence. Though Lily twice attempts to call their children, there is no answer. Henry and Lily are locked outside of their comfortably established and structured past; they are now a part of the “sub”stratum that lies outside of the life of the urban, in a horizontally constructed *motel* – a dwelling that is too meagre to make any type of phallic claim upon the landscape.

The suburban motel is an apt venue for Henry and Lily’s stay as it is a symbol that resides on the vestiges of the terrain of production. The suburban setting of the motel acts as a symbol that renews the logics of separate spheres. It was in the midst of

¹ *The End of Civilization* comes in a collection of six plays by Walker. The collection is entitled *Suburban Motel*, and all six plays document the trials and tribulations of the working class in contemporary society.

suburbia that Betty Friedan spoke of “The Problem That Has No Name,” giving voice to the plights of the suburban housewife who “was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – ‘Is this all?’” (439). Within the suburban setting, Henry tries to uphold the old logic of separate spheres, becoming furious every time Lily suggests that she can get a job. When Lily voices her concern over losing their house, Henry bluntly states:

Fuck the house! Fuck it. It’s not the centre of my life. It’s the centre of your fucking life. To me it’s just a weight around my neck. My life is work. I’m supposed to get up and go somewhere every day and do a job that people respect me for. That’s my life. And if I can’t do that then ...the hell with it. (255-256)

Henry’s fixation upon a structured life of work, a structure which would provide meaning in an otherwise disorganized life, is not only contingent upon finding a job. He is fixated upon reinstating all of the logics that were deployed by capital in the age of production, including the central tenet that upheld the logic of separate spheres: woman’s dependence upon the male breadwinner. In spite of the fact that society long ago surpassed the stringent logics of separate spheres, Henry still insists that these logics operate in his marriage with Lily.

In order to accentuate the temporal disorganization of the consumer society that leaves Henry yearning for the established temporal structures that labour had provided, Walker has structured the entire play without a coherent time line. The play weaves itself in and out of flashbacks, finally ending at the beginning with Lily and Henry’s arrival at the “reasonably priced” and “relatively safe” motel (250-251). The play ends with stage directions that signify the lack of fixed space and time in Henry and Lily’s

lives, with Lily sitting on the motel bed, staring into space “for about two minutes before...blackout” (260). There is nothing fixed about their lives -- their past is obscured and unreachable, and their future is uncertain. Their present, then, can only be a void.²

If we are to make use of Jean Baudrillard’s model of simulation, the suburban motel is a part of the real of production whose “vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of Empire, but our own” (*Simulations 2*). The suburban motel is a space in which the logics of production are allowed to persist symbolically, but they no longer operate; Henry’s attempts to operate by logics that are now obsolete will only ever lead him back to the desert – the stagnant motel room. Significantly, the smell of stagnancy cannot be aired out of the room (250-251) as it is a symbolic container for social refuse; it is the deserted landscape that is reserved for those who have opted for defection from – rather than assimilation within – consumer society. Man’s former identity is not only displaced, but the new venue in which his old identity persists as residue is one that is characterized by immobility. Henry’s aggravations can be voiced within the walls of the motel, but his concerns can only ever resonate and accumulate within its confines. His concerns, then, amount to nothing

² This temporal disorganization of consumer society is also interesting if we turn to Friedrich Nietzsche’s exploration of the implications of the death of God in *The Gay Science*. The preaching madman speaks of the Earth being unchained from the sun as a result of God’s death, and he asks his audience: “where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and down? Aren’t we straying as though through an infinite nothing? Isn’t empty space breathing at us?” (120). It is these same issues that are at the heart of Henry’s dilemma. These are implications that are explored by Walker as he follows Henry’s confusion at the advent of a new era and, as will be explored below, Walker does offer the appearance of a dead God in the form of Al Mazilli in order to develop this metaphor.

more than stale breath. There is no mixing of outside and inside (the outside – the public realm – being the venue that was traditionally reserved for men); Henry is trapped in a limited inside, outside of the space within which he would have access to the dynamic base within which desires and concerns must be articulated in order to have significant effects. While Patrick Bateman is trapped on the inside of a society that has no line of flight – no outside – the outside space which Henry occupies – the suburban space – is limited and ineffectual. That this space is characterized by confines – limitations – signifies that the space which Henry has chosen as his domain is also one which lacks an accessible outside.

Henry's expressions of discontent seem hyperbolic, especially considering that the characters that surround him somehow seem to be more modern than the modernity that he attempts to enact. If Henry's suburban fantasy was not disrupted by his frustrations with the new society in which people "don't think it's important to ...have people working" (252), the play could be considered pastiche, parody "without the satirical impulse, without laughter" (Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 5). As it stands, Henry himself is a pastiche; he parodies the man of production without laughter, speaking his dead language. Everything about Henry feels anachronistic, especially the language that he uses to express his frustrations towards a society that denies him access to the realm that he considers to be the only venue that would give his life meaning.

Although Henry's expressions of discontent are extreme, he is not alone. When Lily confronts Henry about the bombs that have been placed in dumpsters at some of the

places where he has applied, he explains to her:

You think everyone's happy out there? Everyone just takes this shit? Not everyone! Some people get upset. Not enough mind you. Most people just go on, accept whatever degrading thing occurs. Getting fired after twenty years of loyal service, that's nothing to most people apparently. They just smile, maybe ask for a reference. But some people get upset. (238)

If we are to consider Raymond Williams's rethinking of the base and superstructure model, Henry represents an element of an old dominant culture that circulates residually within a base that no longer produces a superstructure that has the logics to support it. There are a limited number of men within the base that become upset as work shifts away from its dominant cultural position at the centre of society, but, to use Henry's words, "most people accept" the transition into a new dominant culture. As an emergent culture rises to central dominance, it is inevitable that elements of the old dominant culture will continue to circulate within the base as residue; Henry is a representative, among a select few, of the residual culture that continues to flow within the base.

This is a significant place for us to stop in order to explore Henry's temporal and spacial surroundings. As Baudrillard claims in *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, there are a number of institutions which "have sign-posted the 'advance of the social' (urbanisation, concentration, production, work, medicine, education, social security, insurance, etc.) including capital . . . the most effective socialisation medium of all" (65). While these institutions claim that they operate with regards to the "advancement" of society, advancement itself is simply a privileged discursive formation, an established logic that legitimizes the very existence of such institutions. Rather than

enacting the advancement of society, Baudrillard argues that such institutions actually produce and destroy “society” through the process of symbolic layering; “the social,” Baudrillard argues, “is formed out of abstract instances which are laid down one after the other on the ruins of the symbolic and ceremonial edifice of former societies” (65). Ultimately, for Baudrillard, rather than advancing society, wherever the logic of progress appears, what is concealed is that progress “is only abstraction and residue, or simply an *effect* of the social, a simulation and an illusion” (66). Thus, the “end of civilization” is not an effect of the *progress* of capital, as capital does not progress; capital is not an aspect of the social, it is, rather, the ultimate institution of socialisation. “Ending” is always the destiny of a “civilization” as a civilization is never civil. The social – the venue for the civil -- “regresses to the same degree as its institutions develop” (66). The social can never be conceived in evolutionary terms. It is, rather, constituted by a succession of symbolic layerings that are produced by institutions in order to ensure their survival; it is institutions that fight for survival, using as their platform the claim that they are operating in the name of “society.” This is not to say that dominant cultures are completely at the mercy of the institutions of capital. It is, on the other hand, capital’s use of the discourse of progress that decentres dominant cultures. Institutions act as centres which establish a discursive apparatus for the circulation of new logics that are sign-posted by the doctrine of progress. The embedding of a logic within the discourse of progress, due to the prestige of this discourse, acts to push all that was formerly central into obsolescence. What was formerly dominant becomes residual due to both its temporal (outside of progress) and

spatial (outside of the rationale of dominant institutions) displacement.

As Baudrillard moves on to discuss our modern situation, his theory becomes particularly useful to our considerations of the residual which is, in Walker's play, embodied within the suburban. Baudrillard claims that:

For two centuries now, the uninterrupted energy of the social has come from deterritorialization and from concentration in ever more unified agencies. A centralized perspective space which orientates everything inserted into it. . . . The social can only be defined from this panoptic point of view. (68)

The convergence of space into a centralized perspective space does not only have to do with the most extreme example of deterritorialization – globalization – but it is also represented by the phenomenon of urbanization, mentioned above as one of the central institutions that acts in the name of advancement. Urbanization is, of course, central to our consideration of the suburban space as the suburban blatantly resides in the shadows of the urban. The social converges into the central and privileged panoptic space of the urban. Rather than speaking of the panopticon in its conventional disciplinary form, Baudrillard is speaking of a “centralized perspective space” which acts as an organizing device; the vision (or motives) of this space are enacted by its periphery due to exaltation rather than coercion. That convergence is a verb – a process – is significant. The space of the urban is the central venue in which capital enacts its vision, sprawling out from the urban space which it has privileged as central. Yet, as this is a process, there are necessarily simulation models that reside outside of the contours of the urban. The suburban motel is a perfect example of this – it resides on the fringes of the urban

and, considering the significance of Betty Friedan to reading the suburban space historically – suburbia was established in order to, among other things, confine of women to a liminal and powerless space in the 1950's – the suburban is also a model that resides in temporal shadows, clouded by the advent of a new era, a new simulation model that has been layered over top of it. These suburban logics are no longer necessary for the operation of capitalism. Henry's use of this venue in order to reinstate the logics which are central to his lost masculine identity – in particular, the stringent line that separated man and woman – is a gesture that would revive a past that is no longer in accordance with the motivations of capital. Although Henry is able to enact the old model of productive masculinity within this liminal space, if his suburban logics fail to converge towards those of the privileged urban centre, he will remain confined within the ineffectual space of the periphery.

The panoptical vision of which Baudrillard speaks is also appropriate here if we think in terms of the panopticon's more traditional disciplinary usage. In Walker's play, when the logics of the new society are threatened by the angst of the old, Max and Donny are deployed as disciplinary agents whose task is to serve and protect the logics of consumer society. Their job is to uphold the law – and it would be most fitting to consider the linguistic significance of the word “law” here. Their job is to speak the language of consumer society. Henry is a threat to the integrity of consumer society precisely because he speaks the old and dead signifiers of the society of production.

The Panopticon of Consumer Society

Although the motel persists as a venue in which the old logics of production are able to persist symbolically, it still resides upon the landscape of consumption as the room itself is a commodity. In order to assuage Lily's complaints about the stench of the room upon their initial entrance, Henry himself speaks like a commercial for the motel, stating that the room is "reasonably priced. It's relatively safe. And it's on a bus line" (251). Both time and space are commodities as they are the products that Lily and Henry are purchasing in their rental of the motel room. This reminds us that the postmodern – the simulation called consumer society – operates without an outside. The logics of the urban do not only operate within a centralized space, but also act as central logics for spaces of the periphery. This is an example of the panoptical vision which Baudrillard argues is central to the workings of the urban. While Henry purchases the room as he envisions it to be a venue in which he will be able to reinstate the logics of his lost masculinity, the suburban itself is a space whose availability is contingent upon the operation of the dominant logics of the urban: commodification.

Although the suburban motel can be bought as a commodity that encapsulates the old logics of the society of production, these logics must remain encapsulated within its walls. As Henry becomes increasingly agitated by his fruitless search for work, he becomes an object under the scrutinizing gaze of Donny and Max who initially enter the suburban motel in order to question Lily about a "strange message" that has been scrawled upon a bathroom wall "at some manufacturing company" (213). When Donny claims that they are questioning "all the people who'd passed through the building that

day”, Lily alters his claim, telling him: “you don’t mean *all* the people. You mean the people who were there looking for jobs and got told there was nothing for them. And that there would never be” (213). Donny concedes that this is the sad new reality, and that it is “happening everywhere” (214). The masses who were socialized as labour power are now left without a venue to enact the simulation which they perceive as being reality. Although it is acceptable for Henry to be perpetually searching for work, Donny asks Lily if he has “attitude” when he embarks on his job hunts. Henry must be optimistic in his search for work; if he shows contempt towards the society in which he is being marginalized, he is a threat to the new establishment which it is Donny and Max’s duty to police. Feelings of discontent are disconcerting to those who are set in place to protect society’s structure; even though there are no jobs to be found, the masses may continue searching for work provided that they do not voice their aggravations. The presence of the language of the old phase of capital upon the walls of capital’s restructured establishments is perceived as a “threat” (213) which results in the dissenter’s pursuit by capital’s disciplinary regime.

In order to properly understand the threat that Henry poses, it is useful to turn once again to the work of Baudrillard. Baudrillard argues that defiance is the ultimate function of the social, and in defiance there is no dialectic. Defiance, rather

is a process of *extermination* of the structural position of each *term*, of the subject position of each of the antagonists, and in particular of the one who hurls the challenge: because of this it even abandons any contractual position which might give rise to a “relation” . . . The protagonist of defiance is always in a suicidal position, but it is a triumphant suicide: it is by the destruction of value, the destruction of

meaning (one's own, their own) that the other is forced into a never equivalent, ever escalating response. Defiance always comes from that which has no meaning, no name, no identity – it is a defiance of meaning, of power, of truth, of their existence as such, of their pretending to exist as such. Only this *reversion* can put an end to power, to meaning, and never any *relation* of force, however favorable it is, since the letter re-enters into a polar, binary, structural relation. (*In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* 69-70).

In our analysis, we see that there is no possibility of “relations” where the old man of production is concerned. The man of production *is* the “old man” who must accept the space of the fringe, or, *the suburban motel*; the man of production no longer has a place on the landscape of capital. In order to establish its central subject positioning, the consumer society necessarily “abandons any contractual position which might give rise to a ‘relation,’” and this is precisely the reason why Henry’s search for meaning can only be a frustrated one – the contract which Henry thought existed between himself and the society of production became void with the advent of a new era. While the establishment of the consumer society is a “reversion of meaning,” an effacing of the old meanings which circulated as truths in the society of production, Henry rearticulates the old rules, the dead language of the society of production, provoking an “ever-escalating” response of the forces that have been established in order to police the laws of the society of consumption. “Societies,” Baudrillard goes on to state, “always produce remainders – whether [they] be demographic, economic, or linguistic – and . . . these remainders must be cleared up” (77). Henry is a part of the demographic that still speaks the residual language of production, and it is thus imperative that he – as a demographic and language – be eliminated. Baudrillard’s concluding thoughts upon this

matter are extremely apt, and very fitting to our analysis of the social function of the police. “The social,” Baudrillard states, “exists to take care of the useless consumption of remainders so that individuals can be assigned to the useful management of their lives” (78). It is Donny and Max’s duty – as agents of the social – to police Henry’s useless consumption of the old imperatives of the society of production; he must either be resocialized or eliminated in order that he, and the individuals surrounding him, can operate in accordance with – can consume and perform – the newly crafted logics of consumer society.

The Death of Production

God is dead; but given the way people are, there may still be for
millennia caves in which they show his shadow. (Friedrich Nietzsche,
The Gay Science 109)

The clash between old and new logics is accentuated in the play with Walker’s symbolic use of the bible. The graffiti that instigates Max and Donny’s initial entrance into the suburban motel is “a joke or something from the Bible” (213), a passage on “concrete rain” (213) that is rephrased as a bomb threat in order to persuade a company to hire more men. It is of further significance that the biblical phrase comes from the Old Testament. Max claims that this is to be expected as “it’s usually something from the Old Testament that gets these guys going. I think it should be banned” (216). The Old Testament represents the old ideals of the society of production, ideals that have been altered due to a rewriting of the capitalist bible. While society still operates from

the same book – capitalism is still the primary institution geared towards the socialization of society -- the rules of society have been greatly altered. Max would ban the Old Testament as it represents a dead language that poses a threat to the newly established order. This is, however, an impossibility as it is the Old Testament that paved the way for the Bible's newer chapters. In spite of the fact that most people operate on the basis of these new logics, there remain a substantial number of people who adhere to the old, a residual pocket of people who would rather have faith in what is deemed obsolete than leap across the glazed-over gap that resides between the two texts. Walker's use of the Bible acts as an apt metaphor for the shift in capitalist logics.

Henry's use of a false reference on his resume also has biblical connotations. Al Mazilli is a man who committed suicide upon being laid off, leaving behind a wife and a seven-year old daughter. When questioned by Lily about the logic behind his choice of Al as a reference, he tells her that he uses Al as "a kind of...tribute. My way of keeping him alive" (238). To Henry, then, Al is a martyr for the man of production, a Jesus-like figure. His suicide epitomizes Henry's current nihilistic attitude – the way that Henry acts under the assumption that "all the rules of the game are suspended" (256) – as Al Mazilli willed nothing rather than settling for the fact that there was nothing to will. What Henry does not realize, however, is that rather than being a martyr, Al represents the death of the man of production. Rather than fighting to regain any type of significant position in society, Al surrendered to the fact that there was no longer a venue for a man of his qualities. Just as the madman in *The Gay Science* says of the death of God (Nietzsche 119-120), it is man who is responsible for killing the man of production, for

losing faith in him and looking beyond his capabilities towards a new era of capitalism where he is no longer necessary. In spite of his death, however, the shadow of this man remains in the minds of many men as it is the only manner in which they are able to understand and organize their life-world. Therefore, Henry still idolizes the God that is dead (the man of production), operating by his codes, and championing his outdated way of life.

Although Henry's nihilism is problematic, it is useful to turn to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche in order to understand the logic of his approach.³ In the prologue of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra preaches about the society of the "last men"—the mindless masses who accept a constructed doctrine of happiness resulting in a society in which "everybody wants the same [and] everybody is the same" (18). Zarathustra argues that just as apes were overcome by man, man himself must be overcome. While the last men say "we have invented happiness . . . and they blink" (18), this happiness is merely an abstraction. In order to move beyond this false notion of happiness, Zarathustra preaches the overman. One cannot simply become an "overman," but those who strive beyond the abstractions in which men have enshrouded themselves act to pave the way towards the overman. According to Zarathustra, the greatest experience that a man can have is "the hour of the great contempt" in which he questions his happiness, reason, virtue, justice, and pity (13-14), realizing that all of

³ Nietzsche is appropriate here, for as Baudrillard states in *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, Nietzsche realized that society operated with an "unscrupulous usage of means, but [with an] offhand disregard for ends" (16); he knew that "it is in this disregard for a social, psychological, historical truth, in this exercise of simulacra as such, that the maximum of political energy is found" (16).

these values are socially constructed.

Henry's stay in the suburban motel signifies his "hour of great contempt." It is during this time that he becomes disillusioned with what he had formally perceived as being the rationality of capitalism, realizing that "every asshole who runs one of these fucking enormous companies can smell these fucking enormous profits, and he knows the only thing between him and these profits is a little human misery" (221). While Henry had formerly perceived his relationship with capital as being a reasonable contract, he now realizes that it is a relationship that has always been based upon exploitation.

When Henry discovers that his wife has become a prostitute his response is phrased as an existential inquiry. Although Henry expresses discomfort with the manner in which she is dressed, he claims that he understands why she may be entertaining such a lifestyle. Henry guesses that, like him, Lily is stressed and she probably opted to do "something outrageous . . . to see if it helps" (240). While he concedes that the money she brings in will help, he ultimately decides that "it won't work, Lil. It's too far away from who you really are" (240). Lily's prostitution is a hyperbolic enactment of that which Henry refuses to do in his search for work; his refusal to scour the want-ads for work, explicitly commodifying himself in the process. As Lily takes on the garb of a prostitute and literally begins selling her body in order to buy back her old lifestyle she is sacrificing her self; she is becoming a commodity in the hopes of "buying" back a lifestyle which, as it needs to be bought, can itself only be a commodity.

Henry's newly formed contempt, however, is not entirely directed at the

capitalist system itself, but also towards the men who do not meet his masculine standards. While Lily expressed doubt when Max and Donny told her that Henry was connected to the murder of three men who shared his plight – the search for meaningful work where such work was nowhere to be found – Henry confesses his guilt when Lily confronts him with the accusation and he goes on to explain the motivations behind his actions:

Oh those guys. Yeah. I killed them. They were disgusting ass kissers. They had to die...They were...depressing. Everywhere I went there was a guy or two sucking up in the worst way. Totally desperate. Totally fucking pathetic. Those three were the worst. Desperate and dangerous. It's bad enough when management fucks you over. But when you see your colleagues degenerating like that it's...well demeaning in a way you can't stand. (239-240)

Henry's disdain for his "colleagues" is of the same nature as his disappointment with Lily for her involvement in prostitution; as men fall into the depths of despair, they sell themselves to companies by "sucking up in the worst way." As it is Henry's hour of great contempt, Henry is questioning his sense of justice, reason, and pity. When he realizes that men are commodifying themselves in order to obtain work, he reacts contemptuously. If we consider Henry's murders alongside those that are committed in *American Psycho*, Henry's murders are even worse than Patrick Bateman's as his recognition that things operate on the trivial level of the surface (where justice, reason, and pity are concerned) is not followed by a search for depth, but the mere desire to eliminate those who operate at the level of surface. What Henry fails to realize is that any type of work, regardless as to how it is procured or what the work involves, is a

form of self-commodification. As Henry makes clear in his argument with Donny just prior to being killed, he is simply nostalgic for a masculine model that is no longer readily available:

That pathetic loser you thought I was isn't really me. I'm not really a person who can be fucked with this way. I mean if you looked at me closely maybe you could see that. Because the man I really am is the man I was. And if you saw the man I was I know you'd be impressed. Look at me closely and try to see the man I was . . . So are you looking. Can you see. Who was I. Who was I! Who was I!! (250)

Henry represents a man of the past who is no longer allowed to possess the phallus; it is ultimately his refusal to put down the phallic gun that decides his fate. Prior to being shot, however, Henry states that he does not care who kills who (249). Henry's possession of the phallic weapon signifies his final attempt to be heard as the "man I was," to speak the dead signifiers of the man of production.

It is Henry's fixation upon what he "was" that is his ultimate error. While Henry goes under,⁴ feeling contempt towards the constructed notions of justice, reason, and pity, his existentialist journey does not penetrate beyond the past to which he has lost access. When Henry realizes that he is no longer bound to a contract with capital – that there never was a contract – Henry proclaims that he wants "to do something *against* someone. *Against* ...something (256). Although Henry becomes disillusioned with capital, Henry's reaction is, in the end, one of revenge. While Zarathustra argues that

⁴ Nietzsche states that "what can be loved in man is that he is an *overture* and a *going under* (15). In order to pave the way for the overman, one must first go under, searching the depths of all of the abstractions that exist in society.

one must not fall prey to the abstractions that characterize modern society, he also argues that revenge is always a misguided approach:

That time does not run backwards, that is [the will's] wrath; 'that which was' is the name of the stone he cannot move. And so he moves stones out of wrath and displeasure, and he wreaks revenge on whatever does not feel wrath and displeasure as he does. Thus the will, the liberator, took to hurting; and on all who can suffer he wreaks revenge for his inability to go backwards. This, indeed this alone, is what *revenge* is: the will's ill will against time and its 'it was.' (140)

Rather than creating something anew from the ruins of his current situation, a "thus I willed it" (Nietzsche, 139), Henry is trapped in his attempts to try and reinstate a past that can never be renewed. Henry is revenging the fact that he could "just be discarded, thrown away like garbage" (256). As his will cannot alter that which occurred – the string of lay-offs in the sector of production as society moved into a new era – Henry wreaks revenge upon the three men who do "not feel wrath and displeasure as he does."

Rather than dealing with Nietzsche himself, perhaps it is most fitting in our analysis of Henry to centre our attention upon a gendered misreading of Nietzsche's society of the last men. According to George Grant's interpretation of *Zarathustra*:

the last men are those who have inherited the ideas of happiness and equality from the doctrine of progress. But because this happiness is to be realized by all men, the conception of its content has to be shrunk to fit what can be realized by all. The sights for human fulfillment have to be lowered. Happiness can be achieved, but only at the cost of emasculating men of all potentialities for nobility and greatness" (Grant 44).

While Grant's reading of the last men is, for the most part, correct, his gendering of

Nietzsche's theory sees those who do not wish to be a part of this society of the last men reaching into the past in order to relocate and comply with another set of socially constructed imperatives, the imperatives that are mapped onto the male body which, when performed, engender him as "man."⁵ Grant's misreading of Nietzsche, however, perfectly characterizes Henry's existential escapades. Henry *Cape* is a parody of Nietzsche's overman; he is the superman who, rather than refusing the contemporary society of the last men in order to locate his own essence, champions the essence of the last men who were the masses in the age of production. Although Henry claims that "the rules are suspended" and that, now "time is all [his] own" (256), Henry opts to search for an anachronistic masculinity that has been eclipsed by the advent of the new era.

As we have gathered from these first two texts, man seems limited to either consuming and enacting a life of consumption or one of production – each of which have their own limitations. While a life of consumption is burdened by a lack of existential depth, subscribing to the logics of production is a choice that very quickly meets temporal and spatial limitations. It seems as though a new form of production – producing the masculine unconscious rather than performing the unconscious as though it were a theatre – is the only viable solution to this postmodern dilemma. In the third chapter, it is precisely this production of the masculine unconscious that will be

⁵ While she does not fall into the same trap as Grant, Judith Butler is also sceptical about Nietzsche's thought when it comes to the performance of gender, noting that the notion of gender performance is an extension of Nietzsche's ideas "that Nietzsche himself would not have anticipated or condoned" (33). While Nietzsche's writing often falls into misogyny, rather than misreading the entirety of his existentialist project by incorporating his misogyny into his philosophy, it is much more appropriate to claim that Nietzsche overlooked the construction and performance of gender .

explored as a possible line of flight from the perceived crisis in contemporary masculinity.

Chapter Three: I Am Jack's Body Without Organs: *Fight Club* and the Rhizome

Underneath all reason lies delirium, drift. Everything is rational in capitalism, except capital or capitalism itself (Deleuze and Guattari, "Capitalism: A Very Special Delirium")

At its most basic level *Fight Club* is a critique of the delirium that is characteristic of consumer society. The story follows the plight of a schizophrenic narrator who, significantly, has no name. He is, as his "repressed" masculine identity Tyler Durden informs him, "not a beautiful and unique snowflake:" everyone in consumer society is "a consumer." In consumer society, one's identity is informed by the things that one owns. Society has become so perversely commodified that there is no longer any possibility of self-fashioning -- that is, unless one becomes "enlightened." Tyler Durden surfaces in order to free Jack's mind from the illusions of consumer society. It is at a meeting of fight club that Tyler most effectively articulates the contemporary plight of man in the context of consumer society:

I see in fight club the strongest and smartest men who've ever lived. I see potential, and I see squander. Goddammit, an entire generation pumping gas, waiting tables, slaves with white collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs that we hate so that we can buy shit that we don't need. We're the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. . . We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars. But we won't. And we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off.

Ultimately, the plight of man in consumer society is that he is enslaved to a system of images and signs. While these images and messages promise distinction, which is a

quality that is central to the identity of man,¹ such promises prove to be empty. The actual potential that men embody is tied to the chains of capital, to the system of objects that circulate as commodities in consumer society.

Because Tyler exposes the fantastical nature of consumer society, he seems to be a more viable version of the real. Although he exposes the simulacral nature of a commodified existence, Tyler himself speaks another layer of simulacra. Tyler represents the hyper-masculinity that was created in the era of production, a masculinity whose central identifying logic is that of rugged individuality. Tyler is the residue of that old masculinity – also a simulation – which, in the new domain that capital has created, no longer has a venue in which to flex its muscles.

While Tyler is an outspoken critic of consumer society, his masculinism does not suffer the same condemnation in the film as does the object of his criticism. When Jack kills Tyler at the end of the film, however, it should be realized that Tyler's masculinist arguments, although they have evaded the thorough critique to which capitalism was subjected throughout the film, are not a viable solution to the crisis in masculinity. Tyler is a tragic hero who fights consumer society to his bitter end. Tyler's tragic flaw is his adherence to a set of principles that are as false as those against which he rebels. The film, however, does not end as would a Shakespearian tragedy. Order is not renewed. The landscape, rather, has become barren as both capital and its hypermasculine foe are put to death. *Fight Club*, then, is a critique of simulation; it is an

¹ Based upon Ian M. Harris's 1995 study in which he conducted surveys in order to distinguish a set of dominant cultural norms which set the standards for men's behaviours and philosophies. In particular, see pp. 12-13.

attempt to demolish the maps that reside upon the desert so that we can once again interact with a landscape that is barren. This is the only way in which man will be able to find himself.

The theoretical model which I will employ in order to push beyond the limits that *Fight Club* sets for man is Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome. In particular, their facing off of the methods of "tracing" with those of "mapping" will be useful for the undertaking of this task. While the tracing is a bounded model that represents a limited segment of a vast map, Deleuze and Guattari argue for the necessity of mapping, of moving beyond the *set* paths that are characteristic of the tracing. Masculinity, and particularly a *crisis* in masculinity can only be tracing as the notion of crisis implies a set of limits that act as referents for the terminology of crisis. Masculinity itself is a tracing as it is a set of specified logics that defines its limits. In order to surpass these limits, I will use this chapter to explore the masculine tracing that is outlined in *Fight Club*, moving all the while towards that which is always the object of such an analysis where Deleuze and Guattari are concerned: the erasing of bounds which would limit subjective experience to a tracing rather than an open and unobstructed map.

The Rhizomatic Nature of Jack

Fight Club is a text which pushes us deeper within the maps of Baudrillard into Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, a concept that networks simulation models in a more generative fashion. In Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, what matters are the connecting lines above and beyond the thousands of landscapes which mould and

articulate the subject and all of the objects which surround him. The rhizome pushes us in between simulation models to a vantage point from which we can see that it is not the maps themselves, but a series of connective lines, some of which are blocked by the enclosures of convention, that make man who, and place him where, he is today.

I will list and briefly outline the six principles of the rhizome. Although these principles do not appear in the same order in which they are sketched by Deleuze and Guattari, I will touch upon all of these principles over the course of my analysis of *Fight Club*:

Principles One and Two: The rhizome operates by the principles of “connection and heterogeneity” (7) as any point in the rhizome can be connected to any other point in a system that operates without a hierarchy.

Principle Three: The rhizome operates in terms of “multiplicity” (8). It is not any single point in the rhizome that decides its nature as all points are interconnected. It is, therefore, the lines that connect the points within the rhizome that are the central aspect of its structure.

Principle Four: The principle of “asignifying rupture” (9). The rhizome may be “shattered at a given spot, but will start up again on one of its old lines, or new lines” (9).

Principles Five and Six: These two principles bring us directly into the domain of Jean Baudrillard. The rhizome operates by means of “mapping” and “decalcomania” (12). In other words, the rhizome is a map with multiple entry points; it cannot be traced from a logical beginning to some form of ending. Maps can exist merely as representations and do not need to be rooted within the real.

The film opens with an important scene of interconnection which suggests the rhizome. In this scene, the viewer travels through Jack’s brain, out through his nose, down the top ridges of a gun, and finally ends his journey at the hand that holds the gun;

this hand belongs to Tyler Durden. Tyler Durden's hand is, of course, Jack's own hand as Tyler and Jack are two personalities who share the same body. As they are two distinct personalities, however, the outlooks which these personalities represent are quite different. While Jack lives upon the simulacral real of the consumer society (he has adopted the tenets of consumer society wholesale), Tyler has rejected this new reality in favour of the "desert of the real" – a residual hypermasculinity that was the dominant culture in the society of production – the landscape that resides on the vestiges of this new simulation. The interconnectedness that is accentuated by the cinematography suggests that both of these realities converge within Jack's mind; this is the confused reality of the postmodern man. While Jack trembles, inarticulate due to his overwhelming fear, Tyler's central motivations are embodied by the phallic weapon that he is using to articulate the dominance which he desires to enact. As the viewer is visually transported through this interconnected network, the film seems to be suggesting that those who consume this film also inhabit the world which is to be unravelled by Jack's mind.

This scene suggests the rhizome as everything flows together – is interconnected – beginning within Jack's brain, a site that represents a complex network in itself. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, the brain functions probabilistically, as messages must not only pass through axons and dendrites, but they must also leap across synaptic microfissures. The brain, therefore, is not a continuous fabric: although

“many people have a tree growing in their heads² . . . the brain is much more like a grass than a tree” (15). In other words, unlike the tree, the brain is not a system that operates within a closed and established logic. The viewer takes a fixed journey through Jack’s brain, guided by the animated sequence on the screen. What the viewer witnesses in the process is particles in motion, floating through the fissures that structure Jack’s brain. As Deleuze and Guattari explain with the principle of multiplicity: “puppet strings, as a rhizome or multiplicity, are tied not to the supposed will of an artist or puppeteer, but to a multiplicity of nerve fibers, which form another puppet in other dimensions connected to the first” (8). If we consider the principle of asignifying rupture, the principle which states that a rhizome “shattered at a given spot . . . will start up again on one of its old lines, or new lines” (9) we see that Tyler and Jack are just that: an old and a new growth that have sprouted from the shattered lines of masculinity. Masculinity is the puppeteer that has Tyler and Jack on strings. As a reaction against the destruction of masculinity, Tyler shatters the illusions of the consumer society by which Jack (representative of all men in consumer society) operates. While Jack is a puppet to consumer society, we see that Tyler’s line of flight is merely one of the old lines that was drawn upon the male subject in capital’s earlier stage of production.

Masculinity itself, however, cannot be a root; it is (as is every other concept, language, subject, etc.) merely a part of the infinitely vast, complex, and generative network: the rhizome. This is where the fifth and sixth principles of the rhizome,

² To have a tree growing in one’s head is to conduct oneself by a fixed – rooted – logic rather than opening up to the other possibilities that are implied by a system of radicles: a generative multiplicity.

mapping and decalcomania, become significant with their assertion that there are multiple entrance points into the rhizome. In the film, the viewer enters at the climax – the point which would logically be situated near the end of the film. Once the viewer has been shown a glimpse of this node, s/he is pulled back into the depths of Jack’s mind as Jack attempts to find a logical beginning to the story. While Jack initially states that “all of this . . . has something to do with a girl named Marla Singer,” he ushers the viewer into a scene where he is hugging Bob, a man who has developed “bitch tits” as a result of the hormones that he has been taking since having his testicles removed due to testicular cancer. Jack finally decides that he must “back up” once again, and he begins telling the viewer about his six months of insomnia, a story that pulls the viewer into his place of work. This is where Jack begins his diatribe against corporations. Not only are the entrance points into his story scattered over a time line that maps his life (temporal aspects of the rhizome), but they are connected to different people and places (spatial aspects of the rhizome): Marla, Bob at the “Remaining Men Together” support group, and the world of white collar labour. Femininity, the threat of emasculation, and consumer society are all linked to Jack in the form of a rhizomatic network. Nothing is central (or originary) in this network, not even Jack himself as this story could equally be recounted from the numerous nodes through which Jack has passed. All of these nodes are linked together to create Jack’s current situation. Jack’s current situation, as signified by his battle with Tyler over access to his body, is an existential crisis. The interaction of networked nodes constitutes the landscape which has given birth to this existential crisis.

Although the narrative has a conventional cause / effect plot structure, this is the result of Jack's faulty logic. The mistake that Jack makes in considering his current crisis is precisely the fact that he searches for a beginning to his story, a logic that would pull everything together. As Deleuze and Guattari state:

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb "to be," but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, "and . . . and . . . and . . ." This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb "to be."
(*A Thousand Plateaus* 25)

Jack's search for a beginning is an attempt to impose a fixed structure upon a series of interconnected yet uncertain and undefined "ands." Since Jack's crisis is one that is concurrently existential and masculine, his fundamental concern is to establish what it is "to be" a man. Jack, then, in locating a "logical" beginning for his story, is imposing fixity upon an existence which can never be fixed. He is tracing his life in terms of a perceived crisis in his masculinity rather than following the lines of his life as a map which would always take him in scattered directions.

It is due to "tracing," the act of following established lines as opposed to the "mapping" of new ones, that man perceives himself to be in crisis. As Deleuze and Guattari point out, "a map has multiple entryways as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back 'to the same.'" The map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involves an alleged 'competence'" (12-13). The crisis in masculinity, as spoken by Jack and Tyler, is necessarily a tracing; it is a language of competence that

measures the individual against a limited sketch. While the map of masculinity seems vast, covering not only the male body but also networked with – most explicitly, but not limited to (as there are no limits where the rhizome is concerned) – capital and the female other, to trace this entire map in terms of masculinity is to limit oneself to the model of the tree, its roots fixed firmly in a specific soil (in this case, the soil of masculinity). Masculinity is a single point upon a map that is infinitely vast. It is, as are femininity and capitalism, a point at which one can enter into the rhizome – a rooted logic which, depending upon the thickness of the roots, threatens to impose limits upon the subject. While one seems fated to both enter into the social via this entrance point (“it’s a boy!”), and to traverse the terrain of the social largely in terms of this initial entrance, this is a limited tracing that can be surpassed provided that one has the mind to explode the bounds of the tracing, to move away from it in an infinity of directions rather than insisting that all divergent lines converge within the confines of a single point, the comfort of competency. In fact, the concept of crisis itself is one which can only exist within the confines of the tracing, since crisis implies either insufficiency or excess, and therefore *limits*; mapping is an operation that proceeds without limits.

Insomnia and Consumer Society

As Jack decides to begin recounting his story from the point at which he suffered from insomnia – a condition that is linked with the dynamics of consumer society – this is a logical point of entrance from which we can begin to map his plight. Jack’s insomnia is itself significant. As he preaches upon the society of the last men,

Nietzsche's Zarathustra tells his audience that "a little poison now and then: that makes for agreeable dreams. And much poison in the end, for an agreeable death" (17-18). Zarathustra is alluding here to abstractions that numb men into the docile state that characterizes the society of the last men. Jack suffers from insomnia because he is not satisfied by the "agreeable dreams" that consumer society has prescribed.

It is "a little poison" (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 17) that Jack seeks when he visits a doctor in order to cure his insomnia. When the doctor Jack visits refuses to prescribe any form of sleep-aide, he suggests that Jack visit the First Methodist Church on Tuesday nights in order to witness real pain at a support group for men who have testicular cancer. Jack heeds his sarcastic advice, feigning testicular cancer in order to participate in a meeting of "Remaining Men Together." After the meeting, the film cuts to a shot of Jack sleeping, his voiceover narration making the comfortable claim that "even babies don't sleep this good." If we follow Zarathustra's logic that sleep is a form of complacency, the implication of this sequence is that "Remaining Men Together" acts as some sort of poison for Jack, as something that acts as a willfully maintained abstraction which clouds his eyes from any possibility of viewing an unobstructed reality.

The exact nature of this abstraction is revealed when Jack begins touring the circuit of support groups and becomes upset that Marla Singer, like him, is "a tourist, a fake." Jack is upset with Marla's presence because, as he puts it, "her lie reflected my lie," and due to this reflection, once again, he is unable to sleep. Jack is not concerned that his lie will be exposed to the other members of the support groups, but rather he is

sickened by the sight of himself as a “faker,” by seeing his own reflection in the shape of Marla. That Jack and Marla can reflect one another implies that their lives are performed as tracings, they can be placed over top of one another and mapped onto the closed circuit that is formed of the support groups they attend. Their scripted performance, then, is crisis.

Although Jack was content with his performance prior to Marla’s presence at the support groups, his performance loses its purity when she arrives. While Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of mapping is one which is spoken in the language of performance, the performance of which they speak when exploring the principles of mapping are not scripted. Mapping is a divergent performance in that it is, at the very least, a partially improvised performance. Performing that which is already written can only be tracing: the enactment of a segment of a map that is enclosed by limits and stage directions. The insomnia that Jack experiences at the beginning of the film has a special significance. It is not simply his lack of sleep that is of concern, but the perpetual state of drowsiness that accompanies it. Due to his inability to sleep, everything he experiences is covered by a partial haze. Jack explains that, “with insomnia, nothing is real. Everything’s far away. Everything’s a copy of a copy of a copy.” The flashing of a photocopier, the procession of paper Starbucks cups on a conveyer belt, these are not illusions that have become manifest due to Jack’s fatigue. They are, in fact, more real than Jack; while the camera is *focused* upon the paper cups that are passing across the screen, and while the repeated flashes of the photocopier act to stimulate the viewer’s attention, Jack is a blur in the background, insignificant, a former reality rendered clouded abstraction due to the

reign of commodities. As Jack glibly states, “when deep space exploration ramps up it’ll be the corporations that name everything, the IBM Stellarsphere, the Microsoft Galaxy, Planet Starbucks.”

When Jack discovers Marla’s ruse he is faced once again with the marks of a system that plagues him, a system of copies. In spite of the fact that the therapeutic value of the support groups is rooted in his ability to speak and be heard at the meetings, Jack, rather than being a self-fashioning subject, has simply become an object, his speech scripted, and his parameters defined by the logics of crisis. His attempt to become real in the face of a system of objects that would push him into the realm of abstraction has only led him to mirror this system; he is a copy of a copy. Once he realizes this fact, he can no longer cry – experience real emotions – nor can he sleep. He is back in his apartment, observing a procession of abstractions as they flash across his television screen, once again an insomniac who is “never asleep, never awake.”

This segment provides an extremely important commentary upon the “crisis” in masculinity. While the film suggests that consumer society is an alienating and unfulfilling domain, crisis itself is not the means of escaping its clutches; crisis, as the film aptly points out to us, can itself be a bounded construction. The recognition of limits necessitates action; one must push beyond boundaries rather than basking in the abyss of defeat. The support groups, for Marla and Jack, provide a venue in which they can be recognized and heard as individuals, but, as they are contained, their aggravations are ineffectual. Being content to reside upon the landscape of crisis will ultimately lead to the construction of another template based upon which copies will be

produced, and the landscape within which these copies circulate can only be a tracing that is surrounded by bounds, containing and pacifying an enormous amount of potential energy. Although Jack ruptured the closed system of consumer society, finding a domain that would cradle him in a new manner, this route has itself proven to be a dead end, a root; he is back to the model of the tree.

Producing the Unconscious: The Wisdom(?) of Tyler Durden

In an interview entitled “Capitalism and Schizophrenia,” Deleuze and Guattari make it quite clear that most therapy is anathema to them, specifically psychoanalysis because it is fated from the beginning to work towards, and become caught up in, the Oedipal Circle.³ They stress that psychoanalysts must stop treating the unconscious, moulding it in the process into a stage upon which the Oedipal myth will inevitably be enacted (76). The unconscious is not a theatre, but a factory: the unconscious is a “desiring machine;” “the unconscious produces” (75-76). To treat the unconscious is equivalent to imposing a tracing upon a map, cutting the productive map from all paths that would move beyond the limits of the tracing. While the unconscious produces by means of its desire, treatment constructs a bounded landscape that would end

³ Although Félix Guattari was himself a student of Jacques Lacan who never severed his ties with Lacan’s Freudian school, the psychoanalysis which he practiced was aimed at abolishing the power relations that conventionally existed between analyst and patient. As Guattari notes, the central aim of this type of practice is “to promote human relations that do not automatically fall into roles or stereotypes but open onto fundamental relations of a metaphysical kind that *bring out* the most radical and basic alienations of madness and neurosis” (qtd. in massumi, x). As Brian Massumi notes, his relation to psychoanalysis was much the same as his relation to parties of the political left, “an ultra-opposition within the opposition” (xi).

production; all that is left for the subject to do is follow the lines that are drawn out for him. Although treatment would put reins upon the unconscious, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the unconscious is “revolutionary by nature because it builds machines capable – when inserted into the social fabric – of exploding things, of disrupting the social fabric” (76). While Deleuze and Guattari realize that the essence of the map is that it is traceable, they suggest that the difference between the two “is a question of method: *the tracing should always be put back on the map*” (13). In other words, to make use of their metaphor of trees, roots and radicles, once a tree is sketched it should be spliced back into the larger model within which it is necessarily a part, the network of roots and radicles which, if one is to follow the productive methods of the unconscious, move away from the tree rather than converge towards it.

Thus, while Jack and the rest of the men at “Remaining Men Together” convene in order to speak of their lives in terms of lack, that which they lack is scripted: muscles, money, beautiful wives, and children. These are the markers of a “successful” manhood. The “crisis” here is not castration but the imposition of limits. As the nature of the unconscious is such that it will ceaselessly produce, the unconscious can only be castrated when a tracing is imposed upon it: the unconscious is castrated in the name of lack, not in the name of the Father. The alternative to therapy: producing the unconscious. When Jack finds that he has become confined within a closed circuit whose methodology – the production of traced copies – replicates the workings of the consumer society, he begins to shatter the bounds that would leave him confined by producing his unconscious: Tyler Durden.

Initially Tyler's methods are, to a large extent, productive. Tyler convinces Jack to break past the limits of consumer society in a manner in which the support groups could not. Rather than settling for the limits of lack in a society where one can never measure up to the impossible and abstract standards set by Gap ads and rock stars, Tyler suggests that it is imperative for Jack to hit bottom, an intensive process in which he must shed all of the tracings which the consumer society would impose upon men. Citing the scene in which the camera scans over Jack's condo, cataloguing his furniture, Kate Greenwood points out, in a comment that calls Mary Haron's *American Psycho* to mind, that "Jack's apartment and the objects it contains are metonymic for his personality." This is a scene, she argues, which enacts a visual representation of Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, "the kind of reality . . . that no longer represents real conditions of existence" (par.3). Rather than having his own reality to speak of, the contents of Jack's apartment act as a system of signifiers which speak for him. As Jack explains to a detective after his condo has mysteriously been blown up, "I loved that condo. I loved every stick of furniture. That was not just a bunch of stuff that got destroyed; it was *me*." This was Tyler's point: to destroy the hyperreality in which "the things you own end up owning you." While Baudrillard's theory sees the fate of man as one which is so tangled within overlapping models of simulation that there is no escaping simulation, the possibility of escape – of unearthing the real – can be found in methodology. Deleuze and Guattari argue that "what distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real" (12). This is hitting bottom, an intensive process in which all abstractions are shed in the

hopes of setting foot upon the real. The greatest moment in Jack's life, according to Tyler, is the moment of intense burning when Tyler has powdered Jack's hand with lye. In the novel, Tyler explains that "everything up to now is a story . . . and everything after now is a story" (75). While Jack attempts to escape the pain through the methods of guided meditation which he has learnt at support groups, Tyler urges Jack to shed such methods and to "come back to the pain . . . don't even think of the word *pain* . . . don't think of the word *searing* or *flesh* or *tissue* or *charred*" (75). By shedding all constructions in the form of methods and words Jack is able to, for a brief moment, step upon the landscape of the real, to feel a pain that can only be his own, an unobstructed reality.

Tyler's speeches and methods often suggest that he wishes to operate by means of mapping, shedding all abstractions which would act as obstructions within the rhizome, blocking men from reaching for their true potentialities. The first two rules of Fight Club, that "you do not talk about Fight Club," act as safeguards which protect the underground movement from being bound to the limits of language. Tyler is always concerned with limits, and when Jack speaks in anguish upon the destruction of his IKEA nest, a home which was almost complete after years of pointed consumption, Tyler cannot contain himself: "I say, 'never be complete.' I say, 'stop being perfect.' I say, 'let's evolve.'" Tyler's tirade suggests feelings of contempt towards the tracing which always measures things in terms of competency. While competency is bounded by limits, evolution is a reaching for that which resides beyond limits: it is a "becoming," a constant process that surpasses the limits of the verb "to be."

If we are to take the workings of the rhizome seriously, it is useful to consider the principle of asignifying rupture in order to understand the possibilities that arise from a break in the rhizome, from the desire to move beyond the limits of the tracing. According to the principle of asignifying rupture, a rhizome that is “shattered at a given spot . . . will start up again on one of its old lines, or new lines” (9). Tyler’s splicing of erect penises into film reels during his late-night work as a projectionist represents the symbolic workings of the productive unconscious, producing and projecting the otherwise ignored plight of modern masculinity into the social psyche. As Deleuze and Guattari state, the rhizome pertains to a map that is always detachable and connectible (21), and these characteristics are illustrated in Tyler’s psychological warfare. The map, however, should also be reversible and modifiable (21): if these characteristics are not present, we are back within the closed circuit of the tracing with its “preestablished paths” (21). Tyler’s splicings would seem to be too rigid to be modifiable, and their origins, from the phallogocentric world of porn, are saturated with the logics of a centred and hierarchical system, characteristics that can only act as blockages within a rhizome.⁴

In general, Tyler’s notions of masculinity are not evolutionary – they are quite the opposite. Not only do we know this, but Tyler seems to know this, too. In pointing

⁴ At the end of the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari list a number of qualities which distinguish the rhizome from centred systems. While such systems operate by means of “hierarchical modes of communication and preestablished paths, the rhizome is an acentred, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states” (21).

out that everything up until and beyond the lye burning incident is “a story,” Tyler is rightly pulling his own words and actions into the realm of simulation. In fact, that which Tyler wishes to construct on top of the consumer society is based upon a well-established simulation model: a primitive, rugged, and aggressive masculinity that is virtually identical to the masculinity which Henry yearns to re-establish in *The End of Civilization*. Tyler asks Jack why *men* know what a duvet is, asking him whether a duvet is “essential to our survival in the hunter-gatherer sense of the word.” Tyler is not only speaking of survival itself here; he is speaking of the survival of a specific myth of masculinity, an ancient and simulated myth in which men held dominion over nature prior to their enslavement to capital and, significantly, held a privileged position over women as, according to history, it was the fruit of men’s labour that ensured the survival of women and children. Much of the masculinist psychology that speaks of the crisis in masculinity finds legitimacy in these roots.⁵ Tyler’s privileging of the primitive reminds us of Deleuze and Guattari’s principle of asignifying rupture. While Deleuze and Guattari would privilege the new because new lines signify the methods of the map – the production of the unconscious – Tyler reaches back for roots. This is a dead end, another bounded tracing – back to the model of the tree. “The rhizome is an antigenealogy” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 21). Although Tyler is effective in whisking away the abstractions which would have men enslaved to the workings of capital in consumer society, *Fight Club* acts to chisel men into pure muscle; they become defenders of the phallic root rather than shedding the weight of abstractions, becoming light, sleek, and

⁵ See Introduction, p. 8.

therefore capable of moving through the rhizome at such a speed that all points would turn into a line.⁶

Project Mayhem: Desiring Machine or Blatant Fascism?

Under the direction of Tyler Durden, Project Mayhem enacts the revolutionary potential of desire that, as Deleuze and Guattari note, is capable of creating machines which would disrupt the social fabric upon their being inserted into it (“Capitalism and Schizophrenia” 76). The sole aim of Project Mayhem is, in fact, disruption. From retail and automotive chains that manipulate and construct desires to the financial institutions that organize the masses according to wealth, there are targets in Project Mayhem only insofar as they are the points which would organize lives in the midst of a chaotic reality. While these points act as blockages within the rhizome, the ultimate aim of Project Mayhem is to explode these bounds, an ultimate equalization referred to as ground-zero.

While the ends of the project – erasing debt records, equalizing the masses – are utopic, the structure that is employed in order to achieve these ends is quite problematic. As Henry A. Giroux and Imre Szeman point out, Tyler Durden “is less a symbol of vision and leadership for the next millennium than a holdover of early twentieth-century fascist ideologies that envisioned themselves as alternatives to the decadence and decay

⁶ Deleuze and Guattari claim that, unlike the structured tree or root models, there are no points to be found in the rhizome. In order to illustrate this point, they refer to the music of Glenn Gould who, “when he speeds up the performance of a piece . . . is not just displaying virtuosity, he is transforming the musical points into lines, he is making the whole piece proliferate” (8).

of the established order of things” (37). Since Chuck Palahniuk argues against allegations of fascism, claiming that Project Mayhem “was designed as an organization without central leadership, without a single figure so that each person by doing a number of assignments becomes so capable or so self-confident that they could replace the original leader” (qtd. in Sosnoski par.18), it is useful to ponder the accusation. To a certain degree, Palahniuk’s point is well-taken. When Jack exhibits feelings of jealousy towards other members of Project Mayhem who are garnering more of Tyler’s attention, Tyler reminds him that, like the other members in the organization, “we’re not special. This is not ours.” In spite of this statement however, one cannot ignore the Brave New Worldesque scene in which Tyler is chanting monotone slogans through his megaphone, conditioning his army as they dig up the back yard at the Paper Street Headquarters in order to prepare for inevitable casualties to the cause that Tyler is preaching. Tyler’s criticism of consumer society is that it is never an individual who desires, but a system of externally constructed organs and machines that determines desire for the individual. How does Project Mayhem solve this problem? As Félix Guattari argues, a constant search for “the machinic composition of totalitarian powers is the indispensable corollary of a micro-political struggle for the liberation of desire” (“Everybody Wants to be a Fascist” 237). The danger in synthetic dualist Marxist thought is precisely the fact that it thinks dualistically, positioning a singular force against the perceived antagonisms of the established order. What this amounts to is simply a new configuration of desire to be inscribed upon the bodies of the masses if the established order is to be overcome. If the first rule of Project Mayhem is that “you don’t ask

questions,” the micro-political consciousness that is necessary in order to absorb and articulate the divergent desires of the masses is overlooked. The result is a massified notion of desire, desire as a singular mass rather than a necessarily confusing multiplicity of divergent desires that would properly account for the many bodies that seek representation. As Guattari argues, “Hitler can be seen in dreams, in deliriums, in films, in the contorted behaviour of policemen, and even in the leather jackets of some gangs who, without knowing anything about Naziism, reproduce the icons of Hitlerism” (“Everybody Wants to be a Fascist” 238). Although Palahniuk claims that he does not even know how to spell fascism (qtd. in Sosnoski par.18), the shaved heads, uniform dress, and unquestioning attitude (“In Tyler we trusted”) that characterize the ranks of Project Mayhem fall very much in line with the rigid and dangerous totalitarianism that is the underlying tenet of fascism.

Castration and the Female Other

The fascistic tendency of Project Mayhem is rooted in an obsession with a phallic masculinity and the threat of castration. The film’s obsession with castration, which begins with a group of men who have literally been subject to castration, carries through the film and is a central concern of Project Mayhem. While big business and politics would castrate men by constructing their desires, Project Mayhem is aimed at the reappropriation of desire, the manipulation of billboard slogans in order to express the plight of the masses rather than the desires that consumer society would impose upon them. When the mayor discusses putting an end to the guerilla tactics of Project

Mayhem, he is in turn threatened with castration, the same fate which would befall Jack if he were to block the path of the project. The implication is that one who does not sympathize with and assist the movement represents the female other.

The problematics of castration, however, are embodied most explicitly by Marla Singer who, in a witty retort against Jack's claim that she has no place at the meetings of "Remaining Men Together," claims that she actually has more right to be at the meetings than he does as she does not have testicles. The only phallus which she does possess in the film is a rubber dildo which, as she tells Tyler, is no threat to him. Marla's possession of the rubber phallus suggests that it is she who is the castrator of men, and that she is in possession of a phallus which, even she realizes, is in no way superior to the real thing. Marla is fated to be nothing to Tyler but a "sport fuck" and every time that she tells Jack that "we need to talk," she is ejected from the exclusively male venue at 99 Paper Street. The aggravations of male castration are vented in the form of extremely misogynist behaviour; Marla is used, abused and discarded as men try to get revenge for a castration that is rooted in their being "a generation of men raised by women." This is no doubt a reference to the transformations that have occurred within the public sphere in the second half of the twentieth-century, reorienting men from their phallic position as producers to the domain of consumption that was previously an exclusively feminine domain.

There is, however, more similarity than difference between Jack, Tyler, and Marla. They are all subject to the workings of a consumer culture that would ignore their desire and this is the reason why both Jack and Marla find themselves speaking the

signifiers of crisis in the circuit of support groups at the beginning of the film. Both Marla and Tyler refuse to be absorbed within the system of consumption; Tyler's refusal to buy food and clothes is mirrored by Marla's theft of clothing from laundromats⁷ and her dining upon the meals of elderly people who have expired unbeknownst to the meals-on-wheels program which provides them with food. While Marla expresses attitudes and concerns that are identical to the men in the film there is no place for Marla in men's directed assault against consumer society. The film, rather than recognizing the parallel plight of men and women, seems to suggest that any form of crisis that is articulated by women is false, from a lack of bumps when Marla asks Jack, in a panic, to perform an examination of her breasts to a scene that breaks far beyond the bounds of taste, a scene in which Marla calls Jack after he has stopped attending the support groups in order to inform him that she has just downed an excessive amount of pills but, not to worry, "this isn't a for-real suicide thing, this is probably one of those cry-for-help things."

Surprisingly enough, the Hollywood ending supplied by David Fincher provides the possibility of redemption for the text's otherwise blatantly misogynist attitude. In the novel, Marla's reappearance with members from the support groups results in Jack's placement within an insane asylum, castrating his efforts by enclosing him within an institution whose task it is to repress desires that are aberrant from those that are mapped

⁷ This comparison between Marla and Tyler, while absent from the film, can be found in the novel as Jack claims that neither Marla or Tyler ever pay for anything (89). In fact, Marla's fear of breast cancer is also voiced alongside a cancer-scare that Jack had during his youth (104) and Marla, in the novel, also has "Tyler's kiss" upon her hand (106), a string of parallels which would seem to suggest that Marla could be, like Tyler, another aspect of Jack's self.

upon the subject by the dominant commercial and state institutions.⁸ For the movie, Fincher opts instead to give the text the “boy gets girl” treatment, ending with a scene where Jack and Marla hold hands as they watch the surrounding skyscrapers tumble along with the debt records which they housed. Rather than forcing Marla to maintain the role of castrator antagonist, man and woman join hands in what should prove to be a new beginning, a joining of hands that signifies a rupture in the tracing that would separate man from woman in the face of a new landscape which has itself been cleared of rhizomatic obstructions. To return to the opening, where Jack is interconnected not only with Tyler in a scene which flows from the depths of his mind to Tyler’s hand, but also with all of the people and events that constitute his story, what Jack eliminates is Tyler Durden, the bounded hypermasculine tracing that was at the root of all of his problems. Resolution resides in the shedding of the phallic root in favour of an unobstructed network of possibilities. A regime that fights against the repression of desire must be a micro-politics of desire that is aimed not only at equalizing the distribution of capital, but also at ridding the social landscape of obstructions that arise due to sex, sexuality, race, creed, and so on. In a reconciliation that is perhaps too abrupt to be truly satisfactory, it is only in the closing scene of *Fight Club* that we are faced with a picture of possibility, the splicing of the map back into the openness of the rhizome.

⁸ As a janitor approaches Jack in the asylum in order to inform him that “everything’s going according to the plan” (208) we are reminded of Deleuze and Guattari’s principle of asignifying rupture, that “you can never get rid of ants because they form an animal rhizome that can rebound time and again after most of it has been destroyed” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 9). This would seem to be the case with the residual hypermasculinity that incessantly attempts to shoulder its way back into / as the dominant culture.

Conclusions

[T]o grant some historic originality to a postmodernist culture is also implicitly to affirm some radical structural difference between what is sometimes called consumer society and an earlier moment in the capitalism from which it emerged. (Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*)

Most contemporary theories of masculinity, without situating themselves within the postmodernist project, speak to the impact that this structural change (from production to consumption) has had upon masculinity. The consensus has been crisis, and this is largely due to the lack of structure in a society of consumption as compared to the highly structured logics which dictated men's lives in terms of time (work and leisure) and space (the workplace and the home) in the era passed. These older logics, though displaced in consumer society, still have a place as residue within the dynamic base where all discourses circulate in order to mould the superstructure of society. As the structure of society has drastically changed, however, there are no longer many venues from which men can articulate a collective voice in the name of this productive masculinity. The result is a sort of anomie, a normlessness which leaves men lost and isolated, and which often results in frustration and violence.

It is this normlessness that is at the heart of the three texts analysed in my study of postmodern masculinity. While consumer society, as it is presented in *American Psycho*, operates in terms of a plethora of rules on its surface, it is a lack of any form of depth that leads to violence. Patrick's violence is an unhindered (due to a lack of deeper ethics and norms) search for depth which is necessarily frustrated due to the lack of an outside to the consumer society. Although an outside is encountered in the form of the

suburban in *The End of Civilization*, it is a nostalgic outside that only exists on temporal and spatial bounds and it is, therefore, ineffectual. In *Fight Club*, it is a similar form of crisis that is enacted, a desire to reestablish the logics that saw man as dominant as opposed to his confused interaction with a system of meaningless objects. It is through the application of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the rhizome – a theory that is not entirely fitting to the contours of the text – that a necessary outside to this chaos and violence can be forged.

The study of masculinity is plagued by a privileging of psychology, a position which is fated to uphold the logics which formerly governed the identity of man, but which have now been displaced by a transformation in the political economy. As Arthur Brittain says of the heavy emphasis that is given to psychology, such a perspective space for the study of masculinity “moves away from consider[ing] the social relations of patriarchy by focussing on the subjective experience of men who cannot function properly in the modern world” (28). It is for this reason that a focus upon the ethos of competition and achievement – the capitalist ethos – seems most appropriate in considering the contemporary “crisis” in masculinity; it is due to the shift in capitalist logics that man feels that he “cannot function properly in the modern world.”

It seems fitting to end with an evaluative note from *A Thousand Plateaus*, the text whose theoretical frame allowed for a surpassing of the limits of the alleged crisis in masculinity:

[W]hen one writes, the only question is which other machine the literary machine can be plugged into, must be plugged into in order to work . . .

Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come.” (4-5)

It is by plugging three representative texts that document the masculine crisis into the postmodernist machine that I have been able to outline the broader social implications of a historically specific masculinity rather than relying upon the psychological theories that root this crisis within the grounds of a simulated masculine essence. Having situated this crisis within the grounds of postmodern theory, I have been able to push beyond the limitations of masculine crisis by plugging these findings into a broader map than the tracing of crisis would allow: the unbounded space of the rhizome. It is only through the forging of new lines – lines that surpass the boundedness of stringently defined gender roles and expectations – that men (and the women which they desire to oppress) will be freed from the frustration of nostalgic desire.

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