

**UNCONDITIONING POSTMODERNITY:
RADICAL ACTS OF RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY TEXTS**

By

TIMOTHY L. WALTERS, B.A., M.A.

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Philosophy Doctorate

McMaster University

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UNCONDITIONING POSTMODERNITY

PHILOSOPHY DOCTORATE (2003)
(English)

McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario

**TITLE: Unconditioning Postmodernity: Radical Acts of Resistance in
Contemporary Texts**

AUTHOR: Timothy L. Walters, B.A., M.A.

SUPERVISOR: Dr. James King

NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 280

ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates several contemporary texts I call subversive defamiliarizations in which characters take extreme measures in order to exist outside of the hegemonic limits of late-capitalist culture. It is my assertion that these texts are different to previous representations of counter-cultural resistance in important ways, precisely because of the wildly unusual methods necessarily adopted by their characters to evade a culture that seems to have become increasingly perverse and pervasive.

Chapter 1 contains an introductory definition of subversive defamiliarizations and the specific cultural milieu which they interrogate. Chapter 2 is a consideration of Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club* and David Fincher's film adaptation, in which the anarchic protagonist instigates a broad range of extreme acts of resistance in an attempt to place himself ideologically outside of consumer culture. Chapter 3 discusses Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* and Danny Boyle's film version, which argue that the rules of modern existence have become so detrimental to the contemporary subject that even a potentially life threatening alternative lifestyle (heroin addiction) may be more rewarding. Chapter 4 examines Lars von Trier's Dogme95 film *The Idiots*, about a group of Danes who are united by the bizarre belief that "spassing," or pretending to be mentally retarded, constitutes a genuine critique of, and alternative to, late-capitalist life. Chapter 5 concludes this dissertation with a brief analysis of three novels—Chuck Palahniuk's *Survivor* and Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama* and *American Psycho*—subversive defamiliarizations that frame their critiques by presenting characters who completely immerse themselves in their culture's ideology. The critical function of these texts emerges because, in each case, an escalating surrender to, and absorption by, the dominant culture occurs simultaneously and causally with encroaching madness.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my supervisor, Dr. James King, for all of his guidance, encouragement, and support. Having worked with Jim for several years, I have benefited in immeasurable ways from his insights, his limitless patience, and an enduring faith in me which I remain very far from understanding. Put simply, this dissertation could not have been written were it not for his unfailing kindness, his honesty, and his friendship.

I would also like to thank my readers, Dr. Joe Adamson and Dr. Imre Szeman, for their invariably helpful and incisive comments, which enriched this thesis in countless ways. Many other members of McMaster University's English Department have helped provide a supportive academic environment, but I am particularly grateful to Antoinette Somo, who has consistently done so much more for me than she ever had to that I will never be able to fully repay her. I must also acknowledge the generous financial assistance I have received (several McMaster Graduate Scholarships, Yates and Marion Northcott Schweitzer Travel Bursaries, and various travel grants from the McMaster University Graduate Student's Association) which enabled me to work on this project.

The demands that go hand in hand with the writing of a thesis have once more confirmed my belief that I am incredibly lucky to keep the company that I keep. All of my friends and family have helped me in ways far too numerous to list here, so I extend my love and infinite gratitude to all of them (you know who you are), for making my life and my work a pleasure. Particular thanks are due to Andrea, without whom I would never have started, and Victoria, without whom I would not have finished.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my parents (Ann and Peter Walters) and brother (Nic 'Junior' Walters), for whom I do these things.

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Chapter 1

Unconditioning Postmodernity: Radical Acts of Resistance in Contemporary Texts

Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a fucking big television. Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players and electrical tin-openers.

Choose good health, low cholesterol and dental insurance. Choose fixed interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. Choose leisure wear and matching luggage. Choose a three piece suite on higher purchase in a range of fucking fabrics. Choose DIY and wondering who the fuck you are on a Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing, spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fucking junk food into your mouth.

Choose rotting away at the end of it all, pissing your last in a miserable home, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish fucked up brats that you've spawned to replace yourself. Choose your future. Choose life. But why would I want to do a thing like that? I chose not to choose life. I chose something else.

- Mark Renton, *Trainspotting*

It would be wrong to overlook the importance of works and ideas which while clearly affected by hegemonic limits and pressures, are at least in part significant breaks beyond them, which may again in part be neutralized, reduced or incorporated, but which in their most active elements come through as independent and original.

- Raymond Williams, "Marxism and Literature"

My dissertation will investigate a variety of contemporary texts that present characters going to often extreme measures in order to exist outside of the hegemonic limits of postmodern culture—limits that have been theorized as possessing the elasticity to incorporate and nullify all counter-hegemonic acts of resistance. While many forms of counter-cultural rebellion have been presented throughout the history of film and literature, it is my assertion that a current strain of these texts are different in kind, precisely because of the wildly excessive and unusual methods adopted by their

protagonists to evade a culture that seems to have become increasingly perverse and pervasive.

There exists a huge range of formative works (by critics and artists from many different disciplines and genres) that precede and frequently influence the texts—Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996) and *The Idiots* (Lars von Trier, 1998)—that constitute the core of my analysis. These three works, which I will call subversive defamiliarizations, all seem to have been constructed with an awareness (direct or otherwise) of the writing of various cultural theorists and also of political¹ movements with similar critical concerns. A teasing out of these influences is neither possible nor useful for my purposes, but throughout this dissertation I will occasionally consider the literary and cinematic depiction of self-destructive, anti-social characters as well as various groups (particularly the Situationists²) who attempted to practice radical resistance. In this introductory chapter it is primarily my intention to demonstrate the extent to which the texts I will be considering as being part of a group (and as being important for that reason) can reasonably and profitably be considered in this way. Furthermore, I will briefly sketch the

¹ I use the term *political* here, as I will throughout, in its most broad and meaningful sense: as relating to the myriad operations of power within a culture.

² The Situationist International were a group of European intellectuals and avant-garde artists (including Guy Debord and Raul Vaneigem) who came to prominence during the 1950s and 1960s and are now known primarily by virtue of the role they played in the May 1968 uprising in Paris, France. Much of their work involved a call for a radical transformation of the practices of everyday life (which they felt should be centered around pleasure and experience rather than productivity and orderliness) in order to combat the corrosive effects of living within a spectacle-based capitalist culture. The best studies of the impact of Situationist writing on contemporary thought are Sadie Plant’s *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* and Greil Marcus’s *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*.

specific cultural and political circumstances which generated these works and about which they so provocatively speak.

The ideological critiques found in these subversive defamiliarizations are clearly part of a recurring historical tendency in both film and literature. However, their particular and peculiar manifestations of resistance ought to be read as heralding a significant moment in the relationship between the worlds of fictional representation and of theoretical cultural criticism. The subject position adopted by these narratives (and their narrators, and readers) is paradoxically that of a citizen armed with an arguably more incisive array of critical tools than was previously commonplace but also pessimistically hobbled by an awareness that these tools are unable to affect any real transformation of the culture they address. Realistically, this co-mingling of outrage and helplessness may be the unfortunate lot of the cultural critic living within a few years of either side of the millennium. In some respects, this is the regrettable legacy of the collapse or fragmentation of Marxism, for almost a century the reliable and useful ideological base of left-wing thought in western culture. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ongoing and relentless Americanization of much of the globe came the dawning realization that a humane socialism would never naturally follow—as Marxism necessarily predicted—in the historical footsteps of a corrupt and inherently unjust capitalism.

Precisely the opposite seems to have occurred: a newfound resilience against all sorts of resistance that has many unsettling implications for the contemporary subject. If anything, genuine alternatives to our present way of life have become almost impossible to even imagine today, let alone implement. As we shall see, this is very much the case

on both a politico-economic and a cultural level, although it is perhaps no longer useful to consider these two terms as being in any way meaningfully distinct. Although seemingly possible (even reasonable) a few decades ago, envisioning a broad, sweeping transformation of either our political or economic system by conventional means is now unrealistic to the point of absurdity. The structures of our society have stiffened considerably amid the transformations of late-capitalism, attaining an institutionalized strength and resilience that is in some respects an awesome achievement. All debates about social upheaval must be framed by and within the long shadow of these daunting contemporary structures. In various ways, each of the films and novels I discuss explores a politics that does not look like politics, precisely because they operate from the unsettling position that standard avenues of political expression and change simply no longer have anything to offer. However, rather than present a flight into cynical disengagement, these texts initiate political critique and call for political action in the daily lives of their characters. In doing so, a crucial part of their defamiliarizing projects is to substantially broaden the scope of that which is understood as ideological, to make visible for analysis the widely held hegemonic notion that late-capitalist ideology is localized exclusively in economic and political institutions.

Hegemony, Resistance and the Necessary Limits of Imagination

It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations.

- Frederic Jameson, *The Seeds of Time*

Today, it is no longer reasonable to ask, as so many gloating and exasperated reactionary thinkers have, ‘What would replace our present system, given the sorry state of all known alternatives (for instance, socialism in its many variants)?’ Rather, the pressing concern must now be a serious consideration of why any kind of widespread change has recently become literally inconceivable and practically impossible. Furthermore, discussion about what could replace late-capitalist consumer culture run amok is hampered at every turn by the resigned sense of futility that no replacement would ever be allowed to be necessary to begin with. This is a massive problem both theoretically and practically, and one which must be approached from multiple angles, even (and perhaps particularly) those which seem most strange or meaningless.

It is neither naively hopeful nor an act of political disengagement to suggest that it is imperative that we are able to collectively recognize hegemonic structures as being precisely that, and that perhaps works of film and literature are uniquely equipped to make such an important recognition imaginable. Indeed, the idea of these art forms’ subversive potential today may be much more pragmatic and reflective of current realities than it is dependent on flighty archaic notions about culture’s power to change the world. How else might a transformation of the ideology of Western culture begin to be seen as possible? Given the embeddedness of late-capitalist ideology in a politics of everyday life that does not look like politics, and the extent to which the products of the culture industry are implicated in the establishment and maintenance of hegemony, the idea of the subversive potential of popular cultural forms should not be discounted.

The relevance of that which can be gained from utilizing the pedagogical power of film and literature becomes heightened if we briefly consider the alternatives, the other

ways in which the divisive and suicidal direction of western culture could potentially be made to change its course. Global capitalism will not stand aside or even substantially modify its devastating greed, given that the world's economic rules are now written by precisely those organizations who most profit from maintaining the present state of affairs. Countless forms of critical and activist intervention at every level of the political and economic sphere has been largely unable to fundamentally redirect the basic economic or ideological priorities of either a governing organization or even a lone multinational. The structures that are most often targeted as symbols of global corporate rule show no signs of significantly concerning themselves with anything other than the ceaseless accumulation of wealth and power and the (equally important) propagation of those infinite discursive formations that naturalize late-capitalism in the public imagination. Suffice it to say, regardless how flawed, how increasingly slanted in favor of a wealthy elite, how soundly condemned as dangerously unsustainable by countless economists, environmentalists, and so forth, a genuine popular reconsideration of our present economic model is far from likely.

In some respects, the fundamental problem of the subject in/of late-capitalist culture is the inability to imagine itself anywhere or as anyone else, to consider its own subjectivity from outside the matrix of hegemonic discourses. The presence of this necessarily restricted vision is most apparent when discussing ideas about economic policies that would be beneficial to the majority of the public but which are never seriously considered. Are we able to imagine, for instance, something as hypothetically possible as the dismantling of the stock market? An immediate end to corporate welfare? Why is it the case that we cannot even publicly debate the implementation of a personal

‘salary cap’ which would restrict the amount of assets one individual would be able to hold, even if such a policy would immediately benefit many fold the number of people it would ‘impoverish’? Although an idea that would increase the standard of living experienced by the vast majority, it seems a self-evidently ludicrous concept. It is precisely this *seeming*, this self-evident-ness, which ought to concern us because it signifies the extent to which sweeping change is inconceivable. Furthermore, also damaging to an optimistic view of the possibility of reshaping the political or economic landscape is a widespread public inability to consider our own personal behavior as being implicated in broader systems which might widely be considered unjust.³ We are a culture that seems immobilized in a fear-induced state of contented passivity. On the polished surface all is well—or seems to be. A real modification of our individual behavior or system of rule is not a topic we are willing to contemplate since it is seen to challenge our seemingly natural (and therefore somehow ‘right’) consumptive desires and practices.⁴

³ This perspective works both in direct and indirect ways. Individual consumer practices in Western culture are self-evidently and immediately linked to broader global inequities (the appalling conditions of ‘third-world’ sweatshops, the destruction of indigenous cultures, and so on) which virtually everyone finds appalling but which somehow seem inevitable and therefore unavoidable. However, a crucial disconnect also separates widespread recognition of the connection between the seemingly apolitical values (whether we choose to formulate them as liberalism or neo-liberalism or in any one of a number of other ways) which sustain late-capitalist hegemony and those real instances of economic oppression which are popularly frowned upon. What unites these two sets of beliefs is a sense of either blindness or resignation, either an understandable reluctance to acknowledge that our own way of life is in any way responsible for the conditions of the lives of those who are the *necessary* casualties of late-capitalism, or an adherence to the comforting position that although our way of life *is* responsible for that of the other, we are powerless to do anything to change this.

⁴ For an examination of the ways in which flawed ideas about individual consumption practices are simultaneously produced by and used to justify almost entirely unregulated consumer policies, see Juliet B. Schor’s “Towards a New Politics of Consumption” in *The Consumer Society Reader*, 446-462.

The politics of personal consumption—specifically those of cultural products—occupy an important role in this study and will be the subject of later discussion. All that needs to be established here is that the broader structures of a society are not ultimately responsible for *forcing* its members to participate in consumer culture. These structures (governments, corporations, the usual left-wing scapegoats) are only responsible for a citizenry's internalizing of late-capitalist values which eclipses alternative ways of being.⁵ A hegemonic system of dominance is by definition neither total nor is it predicated on direct state-sanctioned coercion. Therefore, culpability exists, at least to a certain extent, regardless of how compromised we may consider the idea of free will as it is currently articulated. The present economic models that govern our culture are only possible because they are endorsed by us every day in the way we consume, allocate our resources, and spend our time, not to mention the infinite superstructural expressions of this base that fill our field of vision. Although assigning blame to those who have most profited from the recent impoverishment of our culture's range of possibilities seems to be a useful and satisfying task, we have responsibilities that exceed this sort of critique. I am not merely suggesting here that only less gnosis and more praxis will facilitate change, which seems a half-truth and one that is reliant on a dichotomy which no longer exists, if it ever did. What I would claim is that, to a significant extent, *the ideologies of our culture can only be meaningfully erased or contested from the very bodies, the subjects, on which they are written and endlessly reinscribed.*

⁵ Obviously, the idea that we could ever identify (let alone reclaim) that authentic part of ourselves that is either outside of, or existed prior to entry into, hegemonic discourse is problematic. The difficulty of locating this lost 'real' is on one level the subject of the films and novels I will be discussing throughout this dissertation, as is the subversive value of the desire to do so.

Given the foundational principles of a democracy, political change is inherently, even structurally, possible in Western culture. The potential of a society's leaders to be changed in order to better reflect the will of the people is the cornerstone of the ideal designated by the term democracy. Although the notion that a genuine democracy exists in any of the world's most powerful nations seems recently to have fallen into public disrepute, this is still the way we characterize the dominant political system operating in Western culture. Ironically, the nation which has most fervently associated itself with the idea(l) of democracy—and famously aligned it to various concepts of personal freedom, liberty and individual power—is the one most impervious to change of any kind. American hostility to nations ruled by 'dictators' (be it Castro's Cuba or Hussein's Iraq), often of the grossest and most direct kind, is routinely justified because these states are seen as a block to the spread of U.S style democracy by preventing free elections. However, both of these nations are vulnerable to sweeping political transformation in ways inconceivable within the country that appears most often to explain its foreign policy decisions with a recourse to the concept of democracy. Ironically, the worst excesses of American interventionist foreign policies are not truly directed at states it finds ideologically abhorrent because they are, for instance, considered staunchly fundamentalist or totalitarian or communist, but precisely at those it considers unstable, that is, *most* susceptible to social upheaval. America may love the idea of democracy, but it also has a long and ugly history of intervening in the affairs of other nations to prevent democratically-elected leaders from taking or maintaining power when their interests do not correspond with the American governments'.

Contrary to the worryingly ‘unstable’ nations that America so often turns its ominous attentions to, a daunting array of mechanisms exist that entirely preclude radical changes in the structure of its own government. American democracy cannot be *fundamentally* changed by the electorate, despite the patriotic chest-thumping about the power of the vote which rises to a fever pitch before an election. The extent to which sustenance and fortification of the present order is all that is offered can be measured by asking the following question: who would you vote for if you wanted to try *any* system other than capitalism and liberal democracy at any electoral level? Put simply, it is functionally impossible for an American with, for instance, an anti-capitalist platform to become president and, even if they did, countless restrictions exist that would prevent them from applying their principles anyway. The fact that consumer advocate Ralph Nader was legally prevented from even participating in a presidential debate in 1999 speaks volumes about the extent to which these elections are really as free as they seem. Because Nader at times adopts an anti-consumerist stance, he is unable to secure the millions of dollars in campaign contributions necessary to plausibly run an electoral campaign. As an independent, he lacks both the indirect influence associated with Washington’s ‘old boy network’ and (if elected) the direct support of Congress and the Senate, essentially preventing him from accomplishing any political objectives he might advance. He would be without the requisite support from all but a handful of the nation’s incredibly powerful lobby groups and various branches of government and face an unfriendly, powerful media not prepared to address deviations from the familiar scripts of political conventionality. Most alarmingly, he would never be elected because, despite rumblings to the contrary from certain left-leaning segments of the population, the

majority of a fearful American populace have repeatedly used the power of their votes in the only way they are able—to call for stability over change, the known over the unknown.

This desire for familiarity, for more of the same only more-so, has led the U.S to a point of seeming stasis, where electing a candidate who seems a cartoonish incarnation of all that is most worrying about contemporary America surely signals some kind of political end-game, one with worrying global implications.⁶ If to many commentators the state of the nation seems almost irredeemably compromised and unjust, the election of George W. Bush, however numerically dubious and marginal his ascension to power may have been, seems to suggest that the majority certainly do not share their concerns about the kind of place that America is becoming. The notion of broad cultural shifts has been intrinsically associated with the muddy world of politics in the public consciousness, precisely the place where change may seem the most likely, given the apparent array of choices on offer, but is practically impossible. The confined space of the election booth and the entire monstrous public apparatus of democracy as it is currently formulated illustrate Jean Baudrillard's famous simulacrum. Again and again we are asked to vote, to think about choice and change, to participate, to debate, all of which conceals and ultimately erases any real concept of actual democratic process. In *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* Slavoj Žižek highlights the contradictions inherent in the American privileging of electoral democracy at the expense of other political systems which are denounced using the catchall term 'totalitarianism'. He reasonably suggests that

⁶ Because of what seem like glaring deficiencies as a world leader, the election of George Bush and his subsequent popularity says worrying things about contemporary American politics on two seemingly opposed fronts. Either he is as grossly ill-equipped to fill the role of US president as he seems to be. Or he isn't.

democratic nations are perhaps overly proud of a style of government that allows them to make a meaningless choice between two essentially identical candidates every four years. He observes that the political choice between “Democrat or Republican in the USA... cannot fail to remind us of our predicament when we want artificial sweetener in an American cafeteria: the ever present alternative of *Nutra-Sweet Equal* and *High & Low*, of little blue or red bags, where almost everyone has his or her preferences (avoid the red ones, they contain cancerous substances, or vice-versa); and this ridiculous sticking to one’s choice merely accentuates the utter meaninglessness of the alternative” (Žižek 240). He heightens the futility of this decision by further comparing the much heralded process of voting to pressing the ‘close door’ button in an elevator after we have selected our floor, which does absolutely nothing to increase the speed at which the door closes, but which is instead an “extreme act of fake participation [that] is an appropriate metaphor for individuals’ participation in our ‘postmodern’ political process” (241). How can we envision cultural change if we have been taught that it can only even theoretically occur in exactly that place where it is now all too apparently impossible? Surely, a part of the reason for this is because imaginative alternatives are elusive and real alternatives are actively prohibited, and it is into this predicament that subversive defamiliarizations intervene.

Adorno and the Politics/Potential of Popular Culture

Numerous critics have pointed out the extent to which various forms of culture are strategically deployed to facilitate the kind of restricted and limited vision essential to the operations of hegemony. It is difficult to envision that which seemingly no one else

can. As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer first argued in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—their influential critique of the culture industry—the majority of popular cultural products are virtually identical, both technically *and* ideologically. This is true of other mediums, but particularly so of those which have the most widespread appeal. Fine art, opera, and ballet can be as politically subversive as they like because, relatively speaking, few consume them. As such, they pose no threat whatsoever to an established order that will not allow itself to be considered as a subject at all, since such scrutiny may challenge its claims to universality.

The extent to which this hegemonic system quietly and efficiently functions can be measured by the degree to which politically challenging instances of popular culture are effectively marginalized by a populace taught to consider such material as either preachy and boring or as some form of insipid propaganda. The regrettable rule of thumb as far as popular culture is concerned is that the more predictable, ‘standardized’ and familiar an object or practice is, the more popular it is.⁷ For my purposes, this is only relevant because the obverse is also true: with a few exceptions, artistically and ideologically challenging works of art are seldom appreciated by, or even available to, more than a small demographic group. It is certainly the case that as a populace we have been trained to desire and respond with rapt delight to that which is most numbingly familiar at the expense of other kinds of voices, other kinds of stories. It is equally true that this strange governing of tastes is institutionally developed and hegemonically necessary.

⁷ There, are of course, several points of overlap here with the political world, wherein ‘acceptable’ candidates *must* represent only a very narrow range of styles and ideas.

The structural, imbedded quality of ideology also has the subsidiary function of obfuscating cultural logic and making transformation difficult for similar reasons. Obviously, it must be stressed that none of these cultural effects are concretely true. Hegemony can and is contested. It changes and is changed, is experienced differently by different people, but nonetheless maintains its basic shape and imperatives. It is simultaneously a process with a structure *and* something reliant on individuals and groups for its unseemly maintenance. Targeting these agents is an understandably popular approach.⁸ However, more important than this satisfying assignation of blame is inquiry into the structural mechanisms that facilitate the ideological homogenizing of a culture in the first place. Popular culture is a largely profit-driven business, and it is easier both to produce for sale and to consume that which is most formulaic or ‘pre-digested,’ although there is typically no practical reason why this must be so.⁹ As such, in a weird variant on *audience* type-casting, we are repeatedly given precisely those products we have collectively shown ourselves to like in the past. Although, as Adorno points out with regard to the popular music of his time, these products must be made to seem somewhat

⁸ The popularity of director Michael Moore’s film [*Roger and Me* (1989), *The Big One* (1997), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002)] and television work [*The Awful Truth* (1999), *TV Nation* (1994-1995)], for instance, is largely predicated on this desire to name names, to put a human face on the operations of corporate global capitalism and make it account for its actions. However, the strength and weakness of these attempts is that such confrontations are inevitably either impossible (Moore is repeatedly prevented from speaking to key executives and politicians and is left to level his charges against hapless security guards or public-relations personnel) or simply pointless (his confrontations with them accomplish nothing). Consider Utah Phillips’ thrillingly dangerous-sounding comments on environmental devastation, which cater to a similar impulse: “The earth is not dying, it is being killed. And those that are killing it have names and addresses” (Phillips, in Klein 325).

⁹ As Adorno points out in “On Popular Music,” “It would not increase the costs of production if the various composers of hit tunes did not follow certain standard patterns. Therefore, we must look for other reasons for structural standardization” (Adorno 215-216).

unfamiliar by minor diversions from the formula (a process he refers to as pseudo-individuation), their ideological content is, and must be, always the same. That Adorno's seminal analysis can perhaps better apply to our time than to his own is all too apparent by even the briefest survey of the most popular current entertainments by considering how they are the same and how they are even nominally different. However, although such a deviation would likely be both fun and easy, I will refrain from including an examination of, say, the contemporary adoration of boy bands, reality television shows, or fashion magazines.¹⁰ All that will be established is that the process Adorno points to is clearly still with us today, and in an even more pronounced form. What is most useful about his arguments, though, are not his now almost taken-for-granted claims about how the culture industry operates, but rather his comments about *why* it functions—and must function—in this particular way and *in whose interests*.

One of the more interesting and persistent questions in contemporary cultural criticism is the nature of the relationship between consumers and that which they consume. This debate is particularly relevant to this dissertation as it marks a rare intersection between the allegedly socially-engaged field of critical theory with the reality it addresses and the people it presumes to speak for, and will be discussed later in greater

¹⁰ I will include one particularly overt example, with regard to blockbuster films. The summer of 2003 was widely discussed in the media as the 'summer of the sequel'. During that financially crucial period when Hollywood studios release their biggest money-making productions, audiences were treated to an unprecedented number of sequels to earlier films which had been profitable for them, including: *American Wedding* (Jesse Dylan), *Bad Boys II* (Michael Bay), *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* (McG), *Dumb and Dumberer: When Harry Met Lloyd* (Troy Miller), *Freddy vs. Jason* (Ronny Yu), *Jeepers Creepers 2* (Victor Salva), *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider: Cradle of Life* (Jan de Bont), *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White & Blonde* (Charles Herman-Wurmfeld), *The Matrix Reloaded* (Andy and Larry Wachowski), *Rugrats Go Wild* (John Eng/ Norton Virgien), *Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over* (Robert Rodriguez), *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*

depth. For Adorno, the social usage of popular culture is directly functional and straightforwardly oppressive. As Negus succinctly explains in his commentary on the culture industry:

Adorno and Horkheimer were not only arguing about how culture had become standardized and robbed of any unique qualities, they also suggested that this resulted in a particular type of consumption in which few demands were made of the listener, viewer or reader. The 'mass culture' that was being produced by the culture industry encouraged consumers to reject everything that was not familiar...this provided mere diversion and distraction and prevented people from reflecting on their position in the world. This resulted in what Adorno (1991) called 'regressive listening' whereby audiences were pacified by a type of music that merely provided a temporary escape from the boredom of the factory or daily drudgery of the office. Such 'mass culture' made people accept the status quo and engendered obedience towards authoritarianism. It was, ultimately, the products of the culture industry, with their pacifying effects and unchallenging qualities, that were allowing people to become 'masses' and be easily manipulated by capitalist corporations and authoritarian governments. (Negus 76)

Today, however, the invocation of Adorno necessitates the acknowledgement of some of the critical responses to his ideas about the effect of culture on the subject. Despite its apparent good sense, his despairing position has been challenged by those who (not unreasonably) feel that his too rigid distinction between "popular" and "serious" music is indicative of a profound elitism and implies that the masses are little more than "cultural dopes," to use Stuart Hall's memorable term.¹¹ This latter accusation is also understandable, and many theorists have picked up on the distasteful strain of condescension that runs through much similarly-themed criticism of the politics of

(Jonathan Mostow), *2 Fast 2 Furious* (John Singleton) and *X2: X-Men United* (Bryan Singer).

cultural consumption. Although this does seem a callous and elitist position to adopt, the fact remains that much cultural theory implicitly *and correctly* assumes this to be the case, and that any survey of the present landscape of popular culture supports such a perspective. As a culture, we do seem very much taken with the mundane, the formulaic, the unchallenging, that which washes over us. Given the chance, as a culture we will almost always choose that which demands the absolute least of us, that which asks for nothing but our thoughtlessness, our subservience, and our passivity.

Not only does this seem to be at least somewhat true across time and in diverse situations, it is a reality that is reflected in almost every widely enjoyed cultural form. It is certainly a sort of elitism to suggest that the most popular things are the most predictable, the least challenging, the least original, but that does not necessarily make it morally wrong or even inaccurate, although it can. I'm not sure *The Idiots* is a better film than *Pearl Harbour* (Michael Bay, 2001)—such debates being only interesting for what they can teach us about what is and is not 'good' or 'bad', and why—but it certainly seems to require more of the viewer, to ask different kinds of questions. Again, this does not make it a 'better' film, only an experience of a different sort, and it is the scarcity of this kind of difference in popular culture that is of interest. As a culture we are drawn, as Adorno so persuasively complains, to soothing mediocrity in all its forms precisely because of the soporific effect its conformity provides. It is regrettably safe to assert that an inverse relationship exists between the number of people who pay to see a film and the intellectual demands that it makes on its audience. The more like other books (or, ideally, television) a book is, the more people will read it. All we need to consider with regard to

¹¹ See Hall's "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular" in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, 227-240.

this particular cultural rule is the extent to which the most spectacularly popular writers (for example, Stephen King, John Grisham, J.K.Rowling)¹² are those that are most adept at recreating the same stories, at adhering to near identical narratives, at being slavishly generic. The same rules apply almost identically in every area of our culture—including not just music and theatre, for instance, but also food, fashion, travel—suggesting that a broad and profitable pattern is in play, one which seems to support the condescending assertions of Adorno and other likeminded critics.

All claims of ‘dopiness’ that address our culture’s programmed-ness, our intellectual likeness to sheep or even lemmings, must be tempered by the fact that the culture industries are brilliantly gifted at giving us glorious bursts of identical pleasures without ever boring us. There is nothing wrong or shameful about loving a McDonalds’ Happy Meal or a Britney Spears’ video precisely because they are made with our enjoyment in mind. They are essentially about nothing but our pleasure, about satisfying our desires. Their consume-ability is their content. There is nothing dopey about appreciating the consumption of that which we have been taught (in countless direct and indirect ways) to want. However, if we believe that all forms of culture *mean*, that postmodernism is the cultural logic of late capitalism—as Frederic Jameson has influentially asserted—it also ought to be genuinely worrying. Whatever new formulation or revision of Marx’s base-superstructure model we think best describes our present socio-cultural predicament, if we believe cultural consumption has consequences—that it

¹² This is not intended as a critique of authors solely on the grounds of their popularity, but is simply an attempt to draw attention to the public’s desire for sameness in their cultural products. The same claims can, of course, be made about those who achieve popularity by adopting a counter-hegemonic stance. Precisely the same fundamental dynamic ensures the continuing popularity of Michael Moore or Naomi Klein as does Stephen King or J.K.Rowling.

is reflective—then we must be deeply concerned about how ideology is currently circulated, reinforced, and taught to us. Viewed from this perspective, the present set of likes and dislikes that constitute public taste is troublingly involved in the creation of a historically specific incarnation of a docile, apathetic, and fundamentally apolitical populace.¹³ Optimistically, I like to think that this sense of concern is the reason for the current explosion in popularity of cultural studies as an academic discipline and for the surprising recent public interest in various forms of cultural criticism that adopt an overtly transgressive, anti-consumerist, anti-corporate, anti-globalization stance. Certainly, similar worries on my part affected the shape of this dissertation, and motivated my decision to consider films and novels that struggle to mean something unpopular and adversarial in a time when this kind of dissenting speech seems both the least possible and the most necessary. I am interested in texts with an unfamiliar telos (which is to say, an eye to something beyond itself), one that suggests that change is possible by speaking to how *impossible* it has currently come to seem.

However, the relationship of the masses to the culture of which they are also a generative and constitutive part can at least theoretically be changed in various ways. Fluid and boundary-less culture has a rare ability to inform and shape the subject but it can do so indiscriminately. Like any good teacher, culture can teach anything. History has repeatedly shown us the extent to which any medium can, when called upon, serve any ideological master, any cultural orthodoxy. Consider the force and beauty, even today, of works whose original intent is entirely abhorrent to us, such as the glamorization of Nazism in the films of Leni Riefenstahl, or the KKK heroics of D. W.

¹³ I do not wish to imply that the relationship between popular culture and the adoption of a certain set of socially useful attitudes is a new development, only that the manner in

Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). As we shall see, critics have suggested that *Fight Club* can be read as dangerously fascistic. However, unlike *Fight Club*, which is a much more ambiguous and ideologically slippery film than such readings suggest, *Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1934) is *ostensibly* a fascist work of art. It is a great work in spite of *and* as a consequence of this, particularly because of the brilliance with which Riefenstahl presents our culture's least favorite moment in recent history as producing some magnificent spectacles. Regardless of the dominance of hegemonic sameness prevalent in today's more popular culture industries, my dissertation is predicated on the notion that this ideological monopoly can be somewhat challenged by a work which might suggest the possibility of other ways of being. As Raymond Williams argues, hegemony is by definition incomplete and is always marked by the possibility of change: "*no mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or excludes all human practice, human energy, and human intention*" (Williams 607). The subversive defamiliarizations I will be examining that operate in and address this space are noteworthy precisely because they show that intellectual and aesthetic dissent remains possible today, despite appearances often worryingly to the contrary. I hope to show that these films and novels suggest that our culture is still capable of producing works that work against it, that we would be wrong to dismiss absolutely (as is often the case) all the products of the culture industry as bearing *only* its ideological stamp.

which this influence is presently articulated if specific to our current historical moment.

Sites of Resistance

Recently, it has been provocatively argued that real cultural transgressions may occur not only in the realm of production but also in the mode of consumption. A good deal of interesting scholarship has been written that suggests that subversions of our culture occur easily and often in the unlikely arena of consumer habits.¹⁴ From the view that everyday practices can be read against the grain or, ironically, in a truly subversive fashion, even the most seemingly implicated behaviors are transformed into expressions of resistance. Ironic detachment, adusting and trips to the mall can be read as empowering exercises of agency, of gender revolt, of critique. This approach has much to recommend it. It is predicated on a humane and generous view of individual subjectivity which characterizes the masses in a much more optimistic way than Adorno often seems to. It presents a flattering picture of the sway held over the masses by processes of cultural production by ultimately suggesting that we are each in control of the flow of power that exists in the relationship between the subject and his culture.

However, I mention this particular approach to cultural analysis primarily because it is fundamentally at odds with some of the core positions adopted throughout this dissertation. Curiously, critical speculation about resistant readings/consumption of some of the most self-evidently reactionary cultural practices have received substantial academic attention while films and novels that overtly contain cultural critique have been only summarily regarded, dismissed like Thomas Frank's insufficiently 'alternative' alternative music. To cite a well-known example of this trend, John Fiske demonstrates in

¹⁴ I am thinking of critics such as John Fiske (*Reading the Popular*), Kalle Lasn (*Culture Jam*) and Michel de Certeau (*The Practice of Everyday Life*), who suggest that various everyday consumer practices may constitute substantive forms of resistance to consumer culture.

“Shopping for Pleasure” that even something as seemingly emblematic of consumerist conformity as shopping at the mall can be (and be read as) politically subversive. However, *Fight Club* is actually and literally *about* political subversion. The situation today often seems to be one marked by a concentration of wholly opposite positions wherein everyone, including savvy consumers and even savvier critics, is capable of producing counter-hegemonic narratives except for contemporary creative artists who actually attempt to do so. Many cultural critics briefly acknowledge the extent to which a hegemony can never be absolutely complete and then proceed to ignore those works that most overtly make their qualification necessary in the first place. This is a dangerous mistake, or at least a missed opportunity. If hegemony is to be challenged then it is surely crucial to look to those who genuinely attempt to challenge it in order to learn more about how this might happen. Obviously, texts that do this and which also attain a measure of popularity must hold particular interest to those who aim to consider the way power circulates and meanings are made in our culture. It is precisely because of the pivotal and complex function of popular culture in the construction and maintenance of hegemony that we must consider those rare instances when it seems to achieve something other, or at least struggles to do so.

How counter-hegemonic works are received and what kinds of resistance are and are not recognized also deserves more significant consideration, consideration they are insufficiently awarded. The coincident and incessant preference for certain kinds of culture obviously occurs synchronically with an equally enthusiastic rejection of other kinds. We are not only taught what to like, but inevitably also what we should dislike and crucially, *when*. One of the most insidious and overlooked ways in which we are trained

to become particular types of interpreters of reality is through the notion that only a very narrow spectrum of human conduct can even potentially be the subject of either popular or introspective analysis. In this way, our dismissive response(s) to politically oppositional narratives are further conditioned by the assumptions we make about what and when culture (in the widest sense of the term, as theorized by Raymond Williams as a set of practices) could even have meaning. The politics of everyday life go unchallenged for the most part because everyday life is not generally registered as even belonging to the conventional and narrow view of what politics means.

The degree to which this view is popularly held can be seen in the common perception as absurdly irrelevant those who try to find political meaning in everyday objects and phenomena, or who attempt to forward an ideological reading of a subject that is conventionally considered apolitical. Although seemingly innocuous, this is such a cheekily prevalent trope in popular culture that it is unnecessary to catalogue its deployment. We are all too familiar with society's condescending ridicule for the obscurity and specialization of academic work, which is often understood as being too rarefied to have any relevance in the 'real' world.¹⁵ Conversely, when serious theoretical attention is given to subjects that are *too* popular (and therefore presumably ideologically insignificant), cultural responses are equally dismissive. Television news programs sometimes detail the condescending and bewildered amusement of the public created (and presupposed) by any newscast featuring a story about a university offering a course

¹⁵ One of the many ways that this cultural running joke is expressed is in the frequent populist attacks on the jargon and inaccessible style of contemporary academic writing, particularly that designated 'theory'. Since 1996 this dismissive critique has been codified by the presentation of an annual "Bad Writing Award" by the journal *Philosophy and Literature* to such academic luminaries as Homi Bhabha, Judith Butler and Frederic Jameson.

on something ludicrously unworthy of scholarly scrutiny. Such (presumably self-evidently) ridiculous subjects as the lyrics of Tupac Shakur or Eminem, the cultural significance of David Beckham's metrosexuality, or the representational politics of *The Sopranos* have all recently been the punchline of this popular joke. Seemingly, although most individuals would claim that they give the topic little or no thought, our culture collectively shares a fairly restrictive definition of what is worthy of study, what is ideological, where we should seek out political meaning and how we should deploy our interpretive resources.

The average member of the American public's position with regard to the operations of his culture and his place within it can be read as precisely the opposite of that suggested in Walter Benjamin's sprawling and brilliant *The Arcades Project*. Strolling through the arcades of contemporary existence, our anti-Benjamin sees no point in scrutinizing the world around him because nothing has meaning, nothing is connected, and nothing has anything to do with him. Ideology and politics lie elsewhere. As must always be the case according to the elegant logic of a successfully formed hegemony, it is this resolutely unreflective cultural mood that ensures that this culture will continue uninterrupted, that disruptions will not be allowed to arise and that they would be spontaneously rejected if they did.

Towards a Subversive Defamiliarization

Although the texts I will discuss throughout this dissertation share many fundamental and overt similarities, it is first necessary to briefly articulate the ways I will be approaching them. The concept and strategy of subversive defamiliarization will come more sharply

into theoretical focus through my sustained discussion of the films and novels that display this quality, but a rudimentary conceptual framework must first be established. Using as a starting point an idea about the function and qualities of art that comes from a very different cultural moment than our own, I hope to rework and expand this notion—Shklovsky’s concept of defamiliarization—by showing the manner in which it is deployed in a group of contemporary narratives, albeit in wholly different ways.

In his influential 1917 essay “Art as Technique,” Russian Formalist critic Victor Shklovsky outlines a critical mode while simultaneously explaining the purpose of art by discussing a literary strategy he refers to as “defamiliarization”.¹⁶ As Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (the English language editors and translators of his work) explain in their introduction to Shklovsky’s essay, his core argument is that:

the habitual way of thinking is to make the unfamiliar as easily digestible as possible. Normally our perceptions are “automatic,” which is another way of saying that they are minimal. From this standpoint, learning is largely a matter of learning to ignore....

The purpose of art, according to Shklovsky, is to force us to notice. Since perception is usually too automatic, art develops a variety of techniques to impede perception or, at least, to call attention to themselves. Thus “Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.”

.... According to Shklovsky, the chief technique for promoting such perception is “defamiliarization.” It is not so much a device as a result obtainable by any number of devices. A novel point of view, as Shklovsky points out, can make a reader perceive by making the familiar seem strange. Wordplay, deliberately roughened rhythm, or figures of speech can all have the same effect. No single device, then, is essential to poetry. Poetry is recognized not by the presence of a certain kind of content or of images, ambiguities, symbols, or whatever, but by its ability to make man look with an exceptionally high level of awareness. (Lemon and Reis 4-5)

¹⁶ “The Russian word is *ostraneniye*; it means literally ‘making strange’” (Lemon and Reis 4).

Using Leo Tolstoy as his primary repository of examples, Shklovsky suggests the various ways in which defamiliarization makes that which appears at first glance most familiar seem strange and unknown: “The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception”(Shklovsky 12). As he later does with regard to Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*,¹⁷ Shklovsky demonstrates how certain of Tolstoy’s novels and diaries contain a multitude of devices which force the reader to consider various everyday objects and practices in an unconventional way. Furthermore, he suggests that the role of the critic is primarily to draw attention to these strategies, which at times lends his argument a too heavy reliance on a largely discredited evaluative rhetoric. In its most extreme form, Shklovsky’s argument seems to imply that the extent to which any given text is a work of art is little more than the extent to which it defamiliarizes; the critic’s purpose is simply to measure this or draw attention to its functioning. However, defamiliarization is fundamentally a technical strategy designed to produce a series of specific affects in the reader, to force them to adopt other ways of reading and of interpreting familiar components of their everyday lives from a different perspective.

Following Shklovsky’s early ideas about the practical application of this theory, the concept of defamiliarization possesses enormous potential to those interested in approaching contemporary works of cultural criticism. The possibilities for an adapted use of defamiliarization today are present in germinal, latent form in Shklovsky’s original essay. Although he eventually turns to examples from the poetic canon (Spenser and Dante, for instance) to discuss specific forms of defamiliarization, he is most persuasive

¹⁷ See “Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*: Stylistic Commentary”. *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, Translated and with an Introduction by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis.

when showing the range of methods Tolstoy uses to achieve this end. In ways Shklovsky implies but does not explicitly acknowledge, the concept itself seems produced entirely by Tolstoy's writing. For instance, the first example used by Shklovsky suggests the ways in which the Russian novelist is at least as much a creator of the idea of defamiliarization as he is an exemplary utilizer of it. Citing Tolstoy's *Diaries*, he uses the author's stylistic devices as evidence of a methodology that is diametrically opposed to the standard manner of perception, which he terms "algebrization":

'I was cleaning a room and, meandering about, approached the divan and couldn't remember whether or not I had dusted it. Since these movements are habitual and unconscious, I could not remember and felt it was impossible to remember—so that if I had dusted it and forgot—that is, had acted unconsciously, then it was the same as if I had not. If some conscious person had been watching, then the fact could be established. If, however, no one was looking, or looking on unconsciously, if the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they have never been.'

And so life is reckoned as nothing. Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war....art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. (12)

And so Shklovsky proceeds to analyze all manner of literary devices found in Tolstoy's works which attempt to affect precisely the kind of engaged or 'conscious' perception which he has suggested are necessary in the first place.

In much the same way that, for Shklovsky, this particular passage offered the possibility for a new theoretical framework with which to discuss art, I think it also contains the potential for a broader contemporary redefinition of the original concept of defamiliarization presented in "Art as Technique". Shklovsky gradually moves from Tolstoy to an analysis of various authors he associates with more poetic or purely literary

defamiliarizing techniques, writers who are more concerned with creating original perceptions of *objects* than ways of being or thinking. The specific strategies he detects in Tolstoy's work seem to be intrinsically connected to some of the novels and films I will be discussing and the use of similar devices therein. However unconscious, the theoretical echoes here are both implicit and explicit and pertain to specific devices and broader effects. It is this strange overlap which I think makes it critically useful to think of the texts I will be discussing in terms of Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization, albeit a defamiliarization incarnated in different ways with a somewhat modulated purpose. As we have seen, in its original usage, defamiliarization is first and foremost a necessary quality of art, the presence or absence of which (measured by the extent to which an author is able to manipulate our perceptions in order to generate certain effects) can be used to delineate between that which is art and that which is not. The revision I would suggest to this idea (and one that I feel was always/already latent in it) is that the shift in perception that Shklovsky discusses is one with considerable political meaning and utility. *The texts I will critique all use the technique of defamiliarization, but principally as a tool with which to radically subvert the (necessarily) unexamined ideologies around which our culture is constructed.* They each attempt to make us critically interrogate the politics of everyday life by making visible the ways in which our world is (and our selves are) informed and shaped by late-capitalist ideology in a manner that is far from apparent.

The formative discourses of hegemony as it is presently articulated are made apparent in both minor and major ways by films and novels that force us to question precisely those qualities of our own lives and of our culture which seem least deserving

of our critical attention. I call these works subversive defamiliarizations because they each contain devices that make it necessary to view our culture against the grain, in ways which make apparent its myriad, often cruel contradictions and which make visible the complex machinery that facilitates and authorizes certain hegemonic movements of power. These films and novels are subversive defamiliarizations not simply by virtue of the instances of resistance they explore but because they force us to consider troubling notions of the relationship between the contemporary subject and his or her culture in a way that I suggest is the necessary first step toward any form of resistance.

Precisely because of the immeasurable political value of maintaining a populace who share a dishearteningly similar way of perceiving and therefore (not) thinking about their place in the order of things, cultural products which cause a rupture in (or subvert) our familiar worldview must be a precursor to any large scale transformation of either a life or an entire society. At the risk of stating the obvious (or, rather, of stating the obvious *obviously*), no revolution of everyday life is possible without first making widely apparent the need for such transformation in the first place. Although countless cultural critiques have provided and continue to provide a far ranging and incisive deconstruction of the ideological foundations of everyday practices, little of this analysis has actually entered the lives of most individuals in a substantial way. Certainly, it seems as if our present hegemony more than possesses the resilience required to incorporate or diffuse any manner of dissent which such nonetheless important work might generate. The structures of our culture simply cannot be fundamentally affected until a critical mass of individuals collectively desire and demand that this be so. As works which actually

entered the public consciousness (to varying degrees), the subversive defamiliarizations I will discuss in this dissertation are engaged in precisely this project.

As will become apparent, considerable theoretical overlap exists between the defamiliarizing effects of these works and the critique(s) articulated in those texts that fall under the broad mantle of cultural studies.¹⁸ Although the subversive defamiliarizations I will discuss and cultural criticism are typically strategically different (but perhaps not as different as they initially seem) they usually share at least a similar *telos*. Since the at times uneasy relationship between these fictional and critical discourses is one of the secondary subjects of this project, it is necessary also to include here a rudimentary first definition of another concept which aligns these subversive defamiliarizations.

In two articles (“Smart Art and Theoretical Fictions,” a review of three books by Chris Kraus, and “‘No Worse Than You Were Before’: Theory, Economy and Power in Abel Ferrera’s *The Addiction*”), Joan Hawkins introduces the term “theoretical fictions” to describe works that operate in the space between “cultural criticism and fiction” (Kraus, “Smart Art and Theoretical Fictions” 27). Hawkins explains what she believes may constitute a new literary genre:

By “theoretical fiction” I don’t mean books which are merely informed by theory or which seem to lend themselves to a certain kind of theoretical read—Sartre’s *Nausea*, for example, or the *nouveaux romans* of Robbe-Grillet. Rather, I mean the kind of books in which theory becomes an intrinsic part of the “plot,” a mover and shaker in the fictional universe created by the author....where theory and criticism themselves are occasionally “fictionalized.” (Hawkins 2)

¹⁸ Countless instances of this overlap exist, which is in some ways the *raison d’être* for this study. Consider, for example, the many connections between the defamiliarizing elements in *Fight Club* and the subversive manner of reading cultural myth called for (and outlined) in Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*, or the critique of consumer culture and methods of resistance discussed in Kalle Lasn’s *Culture Jam* or, for that matter, in any one of a number of Situationist texts.

It is in precisely these terms that the subversive defamiliarizations under analysis ought to be read. Although, as we shall see, academic responses to these texts often dismiss as naive or misguided (or worse) the theorizing they attempt—a reaction which raises many questions about the institutionalized privileging of certain forms of critical discourse over others—they deserve considerably more attention than this if only *because* of their greater cultural penetration. I hope to demonstrate that the texts I discuss do not simply incorporate or dramatize the critiques articulated by contemporary cultural critics in order to lend themselves an intellectual *cachet* that they have not earned.¹⁹ Rather, they enter into a more engaged and active relationship with whatever particular theory or theories they utilize. They participate in the same debates, explore similar paradoxes, and ask similar questions from a perspective that, although clearly different, should not be read as fundamentally compromised or secondary on these grounds alone. As we shall see, rather than disregarding the subversive intent and function of these texts because of their popularity, which can (too easily) be read as indicating their complicity with the hegemony they seem to challenge, they ought to be of interest particularly (but not exclusively) by virtue of this popularity. If these works are, as Hawkins proposes, emblematic of a breakdown between cultural criticism and fiction, a reckoning of the specific ways in which ideological critiques function differently within mass culture should be a central analytic concern. In my discussion of subversive defamiliarizations that specifically address the complex ways in which the subject (re)produces and is a

¹⁹ Although I think this critique could (and should) more reasonably and justifiably be applied to a film such as *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999), whose explicit and thematic allusions to Baudrillard do nothing with his theorizing other than present an awareness of it.

product of late-capitalist hegemony, it is my intention to demonstrate the value of such an approach.

The State of/and Cultural Criticism

It is precisely the current view of the implausibility of a paradigmatic cultural shift—arguably at the time that it seems most necessary—that informs all the texts I will be examining, that is what unites them and separates them from other apparently likeminded narratives. It is certainly the case that the actively anti-bourgeois character has been a fixture of both novels and films for many years. Cultural critique and resistance are omnipresent tropes in the thematic landscape of both these forms, stretching as far back as the mediums have existed. It is not an overstatement to suggest that an uneasy attitude toward the values of a dominant culture is an almost necessary precondition both for the production of great film and literature and for the development of artistic forms. However tame early critiques may seem by contemporary standards, a palpable sense of outrage and affronted social conscience is present in glorious abundance throughout the novel's history: from Richardson's *Clarissa* to much of Dickens, Flaubert, Twain, Austen and the Bröntes, Hardy, Elliot, James, Lawrence, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Woolf and more or less every other Western novelist who has staked a claim to a spot in the canon. Although clearly a matter of degrees—Richardson is no Flaubert, Madame Bovary is no Tyler Durden—the fact remains that the ungainly shape of the contemporary novel is crafted out of a lengthy tradition of disgruntled novelists and characters who viewed their culture, or at least part(s) of it, as profoundly unhealthy.

If one were to attempt to tease out the more contemporary, explicit and immediate antecedents whose influence on the narratives I will be discussing is most intertextually apparent, the present train of thought begins at about the middle of the 20th century. The work of the beat writers and particularly William S. Burroughs, the still underrated contributions of Henry Miller and other post- World War Two novelists such as George Orwell, J.D. Salinger, Kurt Vonnegut, J.G. Ballard, and Thomas Pynchon all significantly contributed to the texts at the core of this dissertation. The great experiments in form and content now understood under the catch-all term postmodernity are especially useful to a consideration of these narratives.

It is noteworthy that many of these authors sporadically worked in the science-fiction genre, largely due to their ominous futurism, depiction of dystopian landscapes, and jaded vision of human life. For practical and theoretical reasons, I have chosen to focus only on narratives that at least seem to take place in the here and now, in a culture that is recognizably our own. However, many science-fiction novels could fit quite smoothly into my analysis precisely because of their apocalyptic milieu. The specific influences I have listed are mostly located on the periphery of the sci-fi genre and as such I will not dwell too much on the works of science-fiction proper produced by these authors.²⁰ Rather, it is the tone and texture of the worlds they create with which to comment on our own that interest me, especially those that both are and are not reflections of our culture by virtue of the author's making strange(r) that which is typically familiar. Here I am thinking of the dystopian settings of *1984* and *Brave New*

²⁰ For instance, although J.G. Ballard is an accomplished producer of several 'hard' sci-fi works such as *Hello America*, I feel his influence more directly stems from such apocalyptic-epiphanic texts as *Crash* and *The Atrocity Exhibition*, whose derangements can never be considered at an imaginative remove.

World, the nightmarish hallucinations of Burroughs' junkie narrators and 'interzone' guides, the surreal and absurd visions of Pynchon and Vonnegut, and the coolly flat urban wastelands of Ballard and Don DeLillo. Our world is made unfamiliar but it is always done so with critical intent, to force us to consider our culture anew and recognize previously familiar and acceptable interests-become-pathologies. It is this provocative device that gives these texts their influential force, one that repeatedly finds expression in the contemporary works that I will look to, albeit in an often more direct and verbalized way.

Cinematic influences are far less clear cut and generally exist with regard to intertextual relationships between particular films than to the subgenre I will designate subversive defamiliarizations as a whole. This may be due to the fact that cultural criticism became a staple habit of film much later in its development than was the case with the novel.²¹ Moreover, the content of film has always been much more carefully and systematically monitored by various censoring agencies, motivated by a recognition of its more immediate impact and still mysterious ability to persuade. The economic structure of the culture industry has, more than any lone figure or agency, also played a huge role in ensuring that dissenting voices and subversive images are marginalized. When held

²¹ The reasons for this are many and of some tangential interest, having much to do with the way film has always been viewed as more purely an entertainment than its literary counterpart, and therefore less 'meaningful' in the popular sense. Obviously, as an inherently more mechanical medium than literature, the technological development of film production and presentation apparatus provided more obstacles to what could be represented. To use a very basic example to illustrate a more complex historical process, *Fight Club* the novel could physically have been created immediately after the invention of the printing press. However, it would have been technologically impossible to make the film *Fight Club* as little as ten years ago when the digital effects it contains had yet to be mastered. My chapter on the Dogme95 movement contains a more sustained discussion about the contemporary link between technologies of representation and the content of films.

against the comparatively low financial risks associated with publishing a book, films are tremendously expensive and require massive public acceptance if they are to make a profit. As clichéd as it may be, it is nonetheless true that in order to succeed financially, movies are increasingly forced to cater to the lowest common denominator of audience taste. Almost every member of a film's target demographic must be able to see and like a film in order for it to turn a profit, and the broader this demographic is the more money it can make. If a film is made with the intention of generating as much revenue as possible—as is invariably the case given the present economic realities of film production, advertizing and distribution—this equation obviously limits the types of films that get made. The easiest way to ensure financial success is to basically recreate with superficial modifications that which has previously been most lucrative. In this way, the seemingly unalterable structures of the entertainment industry ensure that it is literally not in the best interests of a studio to make a particularly subversive or critical film that could theoretically offend the sensibilities of an audience by challenging or violating their most cherished assumptions. Obviously, as some of the films I will consider suggest, this is not always the case. Their existence and curious popularity suggest that things may not be so completely bleak but, as we shall see, their rarity may also hint at precisely the opposite.

Whether widely seen films such as *Fight Club* or *Trainspotting* constitute an ideologically alternative cinema is something that has been much discussed, but the question is complicated by the growing belief that a genuinely 'alternative' film culture may not exist today, or at least not in the arena of popular culture. Furthermore, popular film criticism in the past decade has been blighted by its foundation in the infuriating and patently ridiculous notion that the great era of the art film ended somewhere near the

release date of *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977). This intellectually lazy view of the (d)evolution of film has helped to fuel the resilient assumption that contemporary ‘movies’ are less worthy of critical analysis than the ‘films’ that historically predate them. Indeed, the corpus of modern filmmaking is forever considered to be in such a reduced state that the end of cinema has been boldly and unambiguously declared every few years since Jean-Luc Godard’s characteristically inflammatory closing statement in his seminal *Weekend* (1967)²². This enduring critical opinion is untenable for a host of reasons, not least of which is its central position that the contemporary film world is beholden to commercial imperatives in ways that it did not used to be. Such a perspective overlooks the extent to which the influence of financial concerns has *always* played a substantial role in deciding what kinds of films would be available to the public. The age of independent cinema did not end with the advent of the blockbuster in the 1970s, and I hope to demonstrate that even decidedly non-independent films such as *Fight Club* are capable of interrogating the possibilities of critique and resistance in contemporary culture in a subversive and uncompromised manner.

However, despite considerable evidence to the contrary, this notion that something has gone missing from the film world is persistent and influential, and has had a demonstrable effect on the way the films I discuss have been critically received. A telling recent indicator of this blinding nostalgia is *Sight and Sound*’s once a decade survey to determine what the greatest films of all time are currently deemed to be. This poll is particularly useful for my purposes because of the range of types of people surveyed (hundreds of directors and critics from around the world), a breadth that reflects

²² The film ends not with the standard “fin” but with “fin du cinema,” one of Godard’s numerous declarations about the demise of film as a culturally significant art form.

the magazine's status as the most reliable and consistent gauge of popular critical opinion. While one would certainly expect and hold no objection to the inclusion of many early canonical films in a list of this sort, the measure of respect given to modern work is notable only by its absence. Twenty films are selected: ten by the critics and ten by directors. In the 2002 poll, only one chosen film (*Raging Bull*) was released in the past two decades. The early 1970s were a marginally more fruitful era, earning two spots on the list (*The Godfather* and *The Godfather Part II*), and the 1960s confirm this trend with four films making the grade (*2001: A Space Odyssey*, *8 1/2*, *Dr. Strangelove* and *Lawrence of Arabia*).²³ The canonization process is slow and conservative across all mediums, as critiques of the literary version amply demonstrate. However, film is a much more recent phenomenon than its printed counterpart, a reality that is wholly un-reflected by the *Sight and Sound* survey. The results of the poll suggest that *en masse* critics consider only one film made in the last quarter of cinema's history to be as good as the best of those in the three-quarters that preceded it. If we were to apply the same formula to literature, no works written after World War I would be considered canonical. Not only do the most frequently selected picks (those that make up the overall top ten lists) largely ignore the work produced in the past quarter of a century, but the individual lists are every bit as unanimously slanted in favor of the past, which is more surprising. Only a

²³ The full results of the survey: "Critics' Top Ten Films. 1. *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941) 2. *Vertigo* (Hitchcock, 1958) 3. *La Règle du jeu* (Renoir, 1939) 4. *The Godfather* and *The Godfather Part II* (Coppola, 1972, 1974) 5. *Tokyo Story* (Ozu, 1953) 6. *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968) 7. *Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein, 1925) *Sunrise* (Murnau, 1927) 9. *8 1/2* (Fellini, 1963) 10. *Singin' in the Rain* (Kelly, Donen, 1951). Directors' Top Ten Films. 1. *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941) 2. *The Godfather* and *The Godfather Part II* (Coppola, 1972, 1974) 3. *8 1/2* (Fellini, 1963) 4. *Lawrence of Arabia* (Lean, 1962) 5. *Dr. Strangelove* (Kubrick, 1963) 6. *The Bicycle Thief* (De Sica, 1948) *Raging Bull* (Scorsese, 1980) *Vertigo* (Hitchcock, 1958) 9. *Rashomon* (Kurosawa, 1950) *La Règle du jeu* (Renoir, 1939) *Seven Samura* (Kurosawa, 1954)" (*Sight and Sound*, September, 2002 24).

small portion of respondents picked even the most celebrated contemporary releases, which is surely indicative of a jaded and very regrettable view of the staying power of recent work by comparison to that previously produced.

To his credit, Ian Christie uses the opportunity given to him by *Sight and Sound* to summarize the results of the survey to address the “shrunk core of widely accepted classics” (Christie 27). In a shift of focus reminiscent of that enacted in Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction*²⁴, he warns that unless the category of judgement itself becomes the subject of inquiry, the survey “will increasingly fail to register the interesting shifts of taste that have made Korean, Hong Kong, Taiwanese, Iranian, Danish and Indian cinema the real news stories of the last years... As long as these remain buried by the heap of worthy votes for Welles, Hitchcock and Eisentein, the poll will only tell us what we want to hear—the mantra of cinephilia: I believe in [insert masterpiece titles here]” (27).

Ironically, it is some of the great creative flourishings praised by these same critics in bygone eras that have most immediately influenced the contemporary works I will suggest are infused with precisely the same counter-cultural energies. In particular, Jean Luc Godard’s more overtly anti-bourgeois work has impacted the films I will be addressing, particularly those films which followed the stunningly savage critique presented in *Weekend* and including his radical work with the Dziga-Vertov collective. This influence is especially prevalent in Lars von Trier’s *The Idiots*, a movie made under the Dogme95 manifesto which is obviously influenced both thematically and technically by the French New Wave of the early 1960s. The surreal, Situationist-inspired antics

²⁴ As in Bourdieu’s text, the focus shifts from the specific objects (here, films) which are selected to the manner in which aesthetic tastes are constituted in culturally useful ways.

found in some of these films combined with their still startlingly explicit political critique finds obvious reflection in von Trier's eccentric work.

Perhaps the most difficult part of my project has been the attempt to remain focused on a particular kind of narrative featuring a certain type of counter-cultural critic and mode of critique. Although historical influences and antecedents are important, I am only really interested in them insofar as they feature, or anticipate the appearance of, a particular kind of narrator whose characteristics are indicative of a new strain of cultural criticism in (un)popular film and fiction. Rather than deal with characters who resent only the specific conditions of their own particularized existence, I shall focus on those who strenuously object to, and retaliate against, more general aspects of contemporary life that are normalized and made familiar by/within the dominant culture. It is extremely important that these characters do not exclusively place themselves in an adversarial stance against a specific or localized political idea or occurrence.²⁵ Rather, the problems faced by these characters are alarmingly and familiarly massive to anyone with a critical interest in the ideology of late-capitalist Western culture. In the following discussion, I hope to show the extent to which the ambitiously broad form of critique that is rehearsed in these texts—*one that is both a critical tool with which to view our culture and a form of resistance to it*—is a product of our unique historical moment, and one which has much to teach us about the mechanics of hegemony and resistance as they are currently articulated.

²⁵ As is the case with the rebellious characters found in *One Flew Over the Cuckoos Nest* (Milos Forman, 1975) or *Network*, or the historical heroics of *Gandhi* (Richard Attenborough, 1982), *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee, 1992) or *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993).

However easy to identify, the ailments of our culture seem less than ever to be primarily the result of a particular policy or leader, although it is tempting to think this way. They are rather the inevitable consequence of a much more widespread and pervasive set of interconnected political and economic realities that govern our lives, whether we like them or not. One of the features of our current hegemony is the extent to which it does not defend itself solely by using its remarkable facilities for co-optation but, rather, that it has so successfully rendered (and absorbed) the very idea of subversion into simply another product to be consumed. Much has been written about the extent to which the boundaries of the once clearly disparate realms of bourgeois conformity and bohemian transgression have been collapsed by rapacious marketers so that a counter-cultural stance now seems a merely stylistic posture. Because everyone is now a rebel, no-one is. David Brooks (*Bobos in Paradise*), Thomas Frank (*The Conquest of Cool*, “Alternative to What”), and Naomi Klein (*No Logo*) have all effectively charted the extent to which this process has occurred and in whose interests. An entire magazine, *The Baffler*, is essentially dedicated to satirizing this recent and worrying conflation wherein all the signifiers of resistance are so popularly omnipresent that they are drained of any real import and ability to affect change.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to find anything that even seems somewhat genuinely counter-cultural not because it has been repressed by our culture but because it has been embraced, and done so to ultimately sinister effect.²⁶ It may seem redolent of

²⁶ An interesting tension is created by this persistent cultural encouragement to dissent and conflicting belief that punishment is inevitable if one does so. Although our hegemony is clearly one which allows itself to be challenged up to a certain point, a kind of nostalgia for a time when this was not the case seems to be popularly present when discussing those who speak out against a given cultural or political reality. I recently attended the “Marxism 2003: Resisting the New American Century” conference in

the worst kinds of hallucinatory nostalgia to yearn for a time when transgression was possible, seemed dangerous, had real potential to affect change, but it is not my intention at all to suggest that this is the case. However, it is a sort of loss, and one with real consequences that are a lot more worrying than they might appear at first glance. In his insightful but ultimately conservative *Bobos in Paradise*, David Brooks charts the rise of the group he names Bobos (bourgeois bohemians). He characterizes them for the most part with a satirical edge suggestive of a distaste for this trend that is reminiscent of one of Thomas Frank's gentler attacks. Eventually, though, it becomes apparent that the dissolution of the centuries-old division between bohemians (who he suggests have been

Sydney, Australia and found precisely such a belief in an oppression that does not exist in the discussion following a speech on "Hollywood rebels from McCarthyism to Michael Moore" by Tessa Theocharous. Following a detailing of the direct coercion and real prohibitions which left-leaning filmmakers had to overcome during the era of McCarthyism, discussion inevitably turned to Moore and particularly the anti-war comments he made when collecting his Oscar for *Bowling for Columbine*. Moore was discussed as a bold anomaly in American culture, bravely risking his commercial success by publicly denouncing his president's unjustifiable attack on Iraq. However, even if we overlook the broader and more obvious problem with this position (that Moore's popularity exists entirely *because* of his political critique rather than in spite of it), the fact remains that the widespread public perception that his comments at the Academy Awards deleteriously affected his career are the exact opposite of what actually occurred. Moore himself has attempted to make this point with regard both to his own actions and to the similar belief that the Dixie Chicks' criticism of the president had a devastating effect on their popularity. An article on his website shows the extent to which both he and the country band suffered a "backlash" involving massive popular consumption of their respective offerings. In the wake of their controversial comments, the Dixie Chicks album went to number one on the Billboard country charts, their concert tour entirely sold out, and their anti-war ballad "Travelin' Soldier" became the most requested song on the internet. Attendance of Moore's film *Bowling for Columbine* more than doubled the day after the Oscars and its total box office gross increased by 73 percent the following weekend. This negative publicity also affected his other works in a similar way. As he explains, "*Stupid White Men* shot back to #1 on the New York Times bestseller list...my books 50th week on the list, 8 of them at number one...In the two days following the Oscars, more people pre-ordered the video for *Bowling for Columbine* on Amazon.com than the video for the Oscar winner for Best Picture, *Chicago*...In the past week, I have obtained funding for my next documentary, and I have been offered a slot back on

around in a relatively similar form since the time of Flaubert) and the bourgeois is really not anything we should be concerned about. Referring to the scathing critiques of this process that make up *The Baffler*, he argues that it “is wrong to suggest it is all hypocrisy or that the capitalist bosses are merely co-opting the lovely ideals of the counterculture. In fact, it’s not so sinister or so one-sided. These renegade executives are both corporate and genuinely countercultural. The two cultural rivals have embraced and co-opted each other” (Brooks 117). The most glaring problem with this position is that only one side of the equation has gained anything from this unofficial merger. Signifiers of the counterculture have been adopted by mass culture *ad nauseam* with a clear end in sight: profit. So much has been written about the pilfering of various oppositional icons (Jack Kerouac and Henry Rollins for The Gap, William S. Burroughs for Nike), about countercultural forms and about real world ‘subversive’ trends by marketers and cool hunters that the depressing list hardly needs expanding here. The relentless need for authenticity and novelty, for the appearance of cool subversion by the image makers who hold such sway over contemporary society has turned signifiers of resistance into its most sustained sales technique. The extent to which this reliance on images, on surfaces, in the presentation of once subversive cultural material has been terribly successful is almost too horrible to contemplate. It may be problematically nostalgic to feel personally saddened that the consummately counter-cultural author of the fiercely adversarial *Naked Lunch* now sells Nike shoes—has ‘sold out’—but it is even more alarming that Nike would be able to so easily and effectively exploit what he once signified.

television to do an updated version of *TV Nation/ The Awful Truth*”
(www.michaelmoore.com).

Furthermore, by definition that which is counter-cultural does not want to become absorbed by the culture it critiques because in doing so it loses the transgressive value that distinguished and defined it in the first place. The counterculture has nothing to gain and everything to lose in this uneasy merger with the culture it critiques. If we are not there already, we are very definitely heading toward becoming a culture without significant dissent²⁷, a hegemony whose status as such is no longer either questioned or challenged in any meaningful and accessible way. Although related to aesthetic and ideological concerns, this is not a problem only of representation but one that suggests most directly the occurrence of a crisis at the point where culture and politics intersect and make meaning. This ought not to be designated an 'academic' problem or one that should only concern cultural critics. It should also be a matter of public concern that our culture is quietly heading in this direction, and it is revealing that this discourse receives so little attention. It is difficult to imagine a development that should be more alarming to a culture than the emergence of a state, of a society of the spectacle, whose assembly and whose core precepts go almost entirely unexamined and unchallenged by the majority of those who live under it. Surely this is precisely what is at stake when we speak of the corporatization of all forms of dissent. In what other ways could we characterize a culture that produces pale and innocuous imitations of resistance, and in doing so achieves such an eerie level of hegemonic perfection that its fundamental ideologies cannot be called into question by conventional means?

This is also not a problem that is only related to the most popular and obviously superficial articulations of resistance, forms that are perhaps already dubious because of the manner of critique they offer. Despite some oddly selective moments of prudishness,

contemporary western culture is weirdly hard to shock. The old standbys of sex and violence are widely considered to be harmless even when presented in a manner so explicit they would have been unthinkable a generation ago. Regardless of how perverse or degenerate our society deems certain behaviors or images, with a few exceptions they are widely accepted to a startling degree. This is particularly the case with antisocial ideas.²⁸ Indeed, ours is a culture that seems quite confidently to allow itself to be ideologically assaulted in any number of public forums precisely because it has nothing to fear. Today, most conventional forms of anti-capitalist resistance seem to have lost their subversive power. We are living in a world where one need not venture to a faraway WTO, G7, IMF or World Bank meeting to protest the injustices of globalization, but can buy a video game and experience the thrill of smashing up a Starbucks from the comfort of our homes. Similarly, it remains a strangely telling phenomena that even works like Noam Chomsky's *9-11* which suggest that America is a more malignant force on the world stage than any other terrorist organization—a notion presumably anathema to popular American thought—is so popular that it is sold *en masse* in locations normally reserved for only the most generic paperbacks, such as airports. Indeed, many of the similarly-themed texts mentioned previously have been equally successful, making a certain genre of cultural criticism one of the booming areas of contemporary publishing.²⁹

²⁸ I am here using Slavoj Žižek's insight (which I will discuss at length later) that our culture seems to be one that actively courts all manner of dissenting opinions and critiques precisely up to that point when these critiques actually have any power to transform social reality. The incessant appearance of only superficially subversive thought is, of course, one of the mechanisms that helps repress actually effective politically subversive ideas from entering public debate.

²⁹ It might more accurately be described as a collection of subgenres of popular political dissent which occur across various mediums. Michael Moore, for instance, invariably utilizes comedy in order to make his critiques and perhaps ought to be considered in the same vein as popular contemporary political satirists such as Jon Stewart and Al Franken,

These are strange times we are living in, when politically ‘renegade’ critics such as Baudrillard and Žižek write book length essays about U.S. involvement in the events of September 11th and get their own cardboard stand in that nation’s biggest bookstore chains. Essentially, and perversely, we seem very much to be living at a time and in a place whose ideology cannot be changed, let alone challenged or critiqued in any conventionally pragmatic way. We seem to presently inhabit a world where we are, to a certain extent, free to ask harsh and difficult questions about the rules of our culture precisely because it cannot be transformed anyway. The texts I have chosen to discuss are all of particular interest to me because of the creative ways they address this unfortunate reality, the manner in which resistances are invented to disempower that which by its very nature is unchanging, irresistible.

For instance, *Fight Club*’s Tyler Durden attempts to resist the all-consuming capitalist ideology he finds abhorrent in numerous inventive ways. The narrative begins with the spontaneous formation of an underground bare-knuckle boxing club in which he and other like-minded men attempt to experience the “real” (unmediated reality, an existence outside the discourses of our culture) by beating each other to a bloody pulp. However, Durden’s actions gradually escalate from minor acts of culture jamming (erasing rental videotapes, subvertizing, vandalism) to major ones (contaminating gourmet food with his body fluids, splicing shots of hardcore pornography into Disney films, selling soap that he has made out of human fat). The narrative concludes with even more serious and destructive acts of terrorism (forming a militia in order to kidnap those who try to stop their anti-consumerist antics, blowing up the headquarters of credit card

rather than those whose critical work has a more somber, journalistic style (for example, Naomi Klein and Noam Chomsky).

companies). The horror and disgust at the state of contemporary society that *Fight Club* shares with all of the texts I will consider is reflected in the frequently outlandish methods of resistance that their characters practice. Each of these (anti)heroes needs to become something else, to transform themselves in order to alter the way they experience the world around them since they believe that world cannot itself be changed. At first glance, these characters seem quite a disparate bunch. These are all works populated by madmen (real and fake), junkies, masochists and terrorists who are united by their commitment to re-imagining the culture that they seem to have no choice but to inhabit.

What these narratives share is an explicit, sustained, and deeply critical relationship with our postmodern culture, a culture which is presented as being so fundamentally bizarre, dominating, and restrictive that it requires the adoption of radically new subversive strategies. The often apocalyptic social landscape of these texts is recognizably our own, although at times it appears to be ideologically amplified. It is one deeply marked by the superficiality, alienation, meaninglessness and oppression of consumer culture which is linked with the approach of some form of unspeakable horror. It is one presented in such a way that these qualities are not, as is too often the case, either ignored or hinted at indirectly. Rather, the malignancy of late-capitalist culture is what these realistically dystopian narratives are *about*.

Because of the perceived deficiencies of this particular hegemonic system, each text incorporates into its cultural critique a potential and tellingly unusual means of evading or curing the unbearable conditions of postmodernity. This aspect of the narratives provocatively places them in the intersection between theories of cultural studies and of literature and film analysis. For reasons that exceed the obvious financial

incentives to capitalize on the cult popularity of some of the books I will consider, many of these texts began as novels and became popular films.³⁰ Generally, I will consider both versions simultaneously where this is the case, and consider what the differences suggest about the critical potentials and limitations of each medium. It seems relevant that the frequency of cinematic adaptations have been read as an attempt to profit from depictions of subversion in ways that these texts seem designed to resist, a process that is a part of the problem that these narratives all address, at least implicitly.

As mentioned, the content of these texts can be read as a practical (albeit fictional) interrogation of some of the core interests of the cultural studies field (analysis of the operations of power, resistance, radical democracy, for instance).³¹ Moreover, they frequently do their own compelling theoretical work by throwing a critical gaze on the troubling ideology that underpins contemporary culture. It is both peculiar and unfortunate that so little academic work has been done on these texts from this perspective³², since they seem to possess enormous theoretical and pedagogical potential.

The relationship between these works and purely theoretical instances of cultural

³⁰ *Fight Club* and *Trainspotting* were both adapted for the screen from novels with a large cult following. Similarly, my conclusion will contain a discussion of *American Psycho* (which was a controversial book by Bret Easton Ellis before it became a controversial film) and *Glamorama*, which is currently being made into a film by Roger Avary, who also directed a version of Ellis's *The Rules of Attraction* (2002). I would also suggest that Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* can be read as a strange kind of 'adaptation' of his Dogme95 manifesto.

³¹ It is not my intent to reductively define cultural studies as a discipline by implying that these are its only primary interests, which is clearly problematic. I only intend to suggest that compelling points of overlap exist between some of the work that is done under the broad mantle of cultural studies and the texts that I will discuss in this dissertation. It is, in fact, precisely these divergent concerns that are what I find most fascinating about the novels and films under investigation.

³² Although each of these texts has received a good deal of critical response from inside and outside of academia, their ideological critiques have been typically addressed (if at

criticism is compellingly reciprocal: each contain analysis of our contemporary moment that enriches the others contribution. The counter-hegemonic existence of Tyler Durden seems to have been directly influenced by the anti-consumerist writings of Kalle Lasn and less overtly by Roland Barthes' idea of the 'mythologist,' an idea that I will also consider with regard to *Trainspotting's* unusual ideological stance. However, *Fight Club* also attempts to offer its own critique both of these theories and of the culture which they address. The maniacal 'spassing' antics seen in *The Idiots* must be considered as at least indirectly influenced by the Situationist theories of Guy Debord and Raul Vaneigem. Accordingly, my dissertation research has involved the work of a range of theorists from various disciplines whose theorizing is either implicated in, or pertinent to, the texts under consideration. I will deal primarily with theorists whose work, like my core texts, concerns itself with both literary/cinematic representation and cultural politics. As such, Barthes, Baudrillard and Neo-Marxist scholars such as Jameson, Williams and (particularly) Žižek will inform the theoretical backbone of my project as they have each made valuable contributions to our understanding of postmodern culture and the precarious situation of the subject within it.

I am also indebted to several of the more commercially popular figures in the world of cultural criticism, who have been so effective at drawing public attention to the specific inequities of our contemporary historical moment. Although operating from quite different perspectives, well known critics such as Thomas Frank (*The Baffler*, *The Conquest of Cool*), Mark Kingwell (*The World We Want*, *Marginalia*), Naomi Klein (*No Logo*, *Fences and Windows*), Kalle Lasn (*Adbusters*, *Culture Jam*), Michael Moore (*TV*

all) as a secondary subject. The exception to this rule is *Fight Club*, which demands that it be read as politically engaged film and novel.

Nation, The Big One, Stupid White Men) and John Ralston Saul (*The Unconscious Civilization*) have all contributed important insights into the way we think about the operational rules that shape our social landscape. To a certain extent, the persuasive effectiveness of these critiques are the genesis of this project. As I have already suggested—as, often, do they—this inability to see an end to the crisis they so convincingly articulate is not necessarily indicative of any deficiencies on their part but is rather a function of the specific nature of the problem.

Naomi Klein's popular and informative *No Logo* is perhaps the best instance of this curious and frustrating discrepancy. This book is replete with an abundance of carefully researched examples of her compelling theory that the recent shift from a product to a brand based economy has had a corrosive effect on almost every area of our daily lives. Contrarily, her text is disproportionately unsuccessful at providing even tentative debate as to how this situation might be rectified or even significantly contested, something she sporadically acknowledges. From her self-declared position as an anti-globalization activist, she presents a few instances of how specific forms of protest have effectively (albeit temporarily) disrupted the operation of particularly villainous multinational brand-based corporations such as Nike, McDonalds and Shell Oil. However, Klein is almost totally silent when it comes to addressing the broader economic and political realities that facilitate such concentrations of wealth and power in the first place although she does fleetingly recognize the extent to which these ideologies must be the real targets if genuine transformations are to occur. *No Logo* is perhaps best described as a book that is unable to fully reject the values of the system which it seems to despise, an anti-capitalist tract paradoxically hobbled by its lingering faith in capitalism.

This bind is one shared by all of the popular cultural critics previously mentioned—and necessarily so. Despite their routinely memorable recommendations for evading the values of our culture, they all seem uncomfortably aware that no amount of hassling corporate public relations representatives (Moore) or listening to only *really* obscure punk bands (Frank) is going to have any real effect on the ongoing development of late-capitalist hegemony. *Adbusters* founder Kalle Lasn has been the object of criticism by many³³ who feel his recommendations of adbusting and other culture jamming suggestions (of which there are a useful many) are similarly superficial expressions of resistance with scant potential for affecting real change. Lasn provides the most practical guidance in the form of suggestions many of which are no doubt useful³⁴ but they ultimately seem hollow and ineffective. Lasn begins *Culture Jam* by pointing out that culture jammers are the first wave of troops in a forthcoming war against consumerism but seems unable to articulate what the second and third wave might be. He is also at times painfully optimistic about the efficacy of the cumulative impact of the countless small disruptions in the day to day operations of our society he advocates.

Most disappointing and illuminating about these popular narratives is the *extent* to which they are so successful at positing a culture that seems ominously on the brink of terrible collapse but are unable to envision ways to stop the rot with anything approaching the same persuasive force. Indeed, with the possible exception of Lasn's

³³ Ironically, including Klein who in *No Logo* makes precisely these claims about Lasn.

³⁴ A loaded term whose import in this conversation I will address more thoroughly later. Suffice it to say here that I have no interest in evaluating the texts I will be discussing by measuring the practical efficacy of the forms of resistance they present (which would, of course, necessitate my participation in some strange and shameful behaviour). Nor do I think that cultural criticism has a responsibility to contain answers to the questions it raises. However, the rift that exists between the problem and the solution in all of these popular critical narratives is so glaring that it warrants analysis.

work in *Culture Jam* where he sporadically flirts with revolutionary rhetoric, none of these writers seem willing to even consider anything other than the most shopworn and mundane counter-hegemonic practices. The rhetorical force of the body of their arguments make their conclusions not just inconclusive but almost unbearable. Often, and this is again particularly the case with Klein, these commentators are explicitly hostile to more radical or violent forms of protest than the ones they allow may be marginally successful. On numerous occasions in *No Logo* Klein denounces the violence and destruction of property that has occurred at various demonstrations and totally rejects all such expressions of rage and disgust as somehow undermining and discrediting the more consumer-based protests she most consistently endorses. Although the invocation to violent rebellion is obviously a complicated and not-to-be-taken-lightly kind of business, Klein's too-civilized and unsatisfying denunciation seems sharply at odds with the kinds of feelings the body of her text is designed to dredge up in the reader. This wholesale rejection of more extreme measures leaves the reader at a frustrating loss. We are left wondering how to practically respond to the encyclopedia of cruelty and injustice she presents, swollen as it is with horror stories from the sweatshop floor necessitated by a system in which we are all perhaps implicated.

While none of the films or novels I will be examining are traditionally utopian,³⁵ each details a manner of resistance or counter-cultural lifestyle that seems at times to point to something refreshingly other. In some ways, each can be read as a supplement to various cultural critiques and could be further regarded as possessing the same

³⁵ However, although they can be read as dystopian in a descriptive sense (presenting our world in the bleakest possible terms), their very desire to formulate a subjectivity outside of late-capitalist hegemony perhaps ought to be interpreted as a utopian impulse. Today, the belief that such a maneuver is possible certainly seems a decidedly utopian fantasy.

complicated relationship to these theories as a film adaptation does to the novel on which it is based.³⁶ It is because of their ability to help us conceive of or at least imagine another way of living that these works are most appealing and occupy such an intriguing place in our culture. My dissertation will be loosely organized around this aspect of these narratives. Each chapter will consist of an examination of a text around the particular acts of resistance manifested by their characters as well as an analysis of what each method contributes to our understanding of contemporary culture and the seemingly impossibility of separating oneself from ideology. It is important to clearly establish here that the purpose of this project is not to somehow imaginatively transpose these fictions into the real world so as to ‘rate’ the practical feasibility of their respective modes of resistance. I do not aim to glibly suggest that the weaknesses of popular culture or popular cultural criticism can be remedied simply by looking to these contemporary films or novels. None of the texts I discuss may be privileged over more conventional critiques in this way; they merely ask similar questions about the mechanics of cultural dominance and the politics of everyday life from a perspective that is necessarily unusual. Rather, I am interested in considering the extent to which these texts, by virtue of their extravagant strangeness, can possibly teach us more or at least in different ways, about the position of the (post)modern subject than can more sensibly ‘grounded’ and respectable narratives of critique and resistance.

Although I have a good deal of envy and affection for the energy, passion and creativity that courses through the anti-heroes of these stories, none of them are able to entirely succeed in their quest to free themselves from the discourse of the culture that

³⁶ My reading of *Fight Club*, for instance, in some ways discusses that film as an enactment or interrogation of the possibility of what Slavoj Žižek’s calls “the act”.

produced them. Inevitably, they can not. All of these texts are the stories of failures and are noteworthy for that reason. Nowhere is a utopian recreation of our world actually presented, only imagined, and then only barely. However, this failure and the reasons for it are their strength and indeed their subject. As such, I will consider the limitations of these forms of resistance and address the arguments of those who suggest that they may ultimately remain tied to many of the ideological notions of the very hegemony they try to upset. Many of these works have been often reasonably criticized for what is perceived as an unsettling deployment and reinscription of dominant ideas about race, gender, sexuality, “coolness” and violence. Certainly, some of these texts are extremely limited and troubling in ways they do not intend to be, often in spite of themselves.

Although in general most critics have recognized the force of the critiques presented in these works, a good deal of uneasy criticism has been directed at the particular ways they preach resistance. Rather than simply defend these works from their detractors, I will try instead to consider what these criticisms themselves contribute to the debate. To use the most ready example, it is all too easy to see why many critics attacked *Fight Club* for endorsing a dangerous fascistic and militaristic ethos as a (potentially dangerous) solution to the impact of consumerism on the contemporary subject. It also may have some unfortunate things to say about women and, also unfortunately, not much interest in anyone who is not white. As with many of von Trier’s recent films, *The Idiots* may too playfully engage many of the most dangerously conventional stereotypes that surround people living with disabilities. Similarly, in many respects *Trainspotting* does (and must) romanticize or glamorize heroin use. However, none of these claims are genuinely as damning to the actual ideological project of these works as their detractors

might suggest, if they are at all.³⁷ In many respects, were the behaviors depicted in these works not so outlandish as to generate controversy, they would not be doing their jobs, given the extent to which they are so dependent on (and *about*) defamiliarizing oneself from conventional values and moralities.

Although I think that critiques of these works are certainly worth balanced examination, I will be less generous with those devoted to the popular recent trick of using theoretical sophistry to flatly reject as ‘hegemonic’ all those texts that try particularly hard not to be. None of these works are ‘really’ reactionary, although it seems to make for good scholarly sport to suggest this is the case since every text I discuss has been read in these terms. Perversely, readings of this sort have become particularly numerous at almost the same time as their equally spurious rhetorical opposite—the glorification as counter-cultural of that which seems most firmly embedded in hegemony—has finally begun to fall out of critical favor. Otherwise, they offer very few useful insights into what the texts that they so shrewdly interrogate actually have to say about culture and what meaning they may have to members of it.

Contemporary Subversive Defamiliarizations

Although the way cultural products of this sort are received is one of my concerns, I will focus primarily on the handful of contemporary texts that most forcefully display the qualities previously detailed. I shall begin with a consideration of Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* and David Fincher’s film adaptation, each of which offer a sustained and explicit critique of contemporary consumer culture. Palahniuk’s novels (*Invisible*

³⁷ It will quickly become apparent that I do not actually believe that any of these things are problematic, nor do I agree with most of these criticisms.

Monsters, for instance) often feature characters who try to find a way to live in an often outlandishly counter-cultural fashion by (ab)using their own bodies in order to combat conventional views about politics and identity. Tyler Durden, the anarchic hero of *Fight Club*, goes to even greater lengths (some of which have been mentioned earlier) to place himself out of the ideological reach of a society he finds contemptuous and unbearable. It is of great importance that in each instance the healing violence of the text is (at least initially) self-directed. The titular fight clubs Durden initiates are not meant to imply that the act of beating someone else up has any redemptive or clarifying social force. Rather, it is the experience of being beaten that is an attempt to help participants locate a place outside of discourse, the language of the body speaking of a real long since vanished from the outside world. As I will suggest, the creative antisocial energies unleashed by this self-inflicted physical damage permit the more externally directed actions that constitute the bulk of the text. Certainly, this is an unfortunate historical moment to be advocating the type of terrorist antics that Tyler and his militia eventually progress to, but there is a logic to their actions which ought to be considered. Even after the horrors of September 11th, the skyscrapers collapsed by Project Mayhem offer a perhaps more provocative and reasonable denouement to the preceding critique.

However, it is ultimately the strangeness and diversity of the counter-cultural actions that neatly punctuate Tyler's charismatic critiques that distinguishes *Fight Club* from other similarly-themed works. The corrupt ideologies of our strange world that Tyler so memorably denounces can only possibly be evaded by essentially inventing new forms of resistance, by forging a way of living that is at all times perfectly at odds with the ideology of the surrounding culture. What distinguishes *Fight Club* is that its critique

is framed by the recognition that, since our hegemony is resistant to change by conventional means, new discourses of resistance must be written, written on and with one's own body. Perhaps most importantly, in a recognition at once fatalistic and optimistic, it becomes clear that that which must be transformed, however difficult the process, is the individual citizen. As such, *Fight Club* is one of the best representatives of the type of contemporary subversive defamiliarization that I will be addressing because of the startlingly and illuminatingly broad range of extreme acts of resistance practiced by its hero.

My third chapter will discuss Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* as well as Danny Boyle's film version, and will specifically consider the politicized presentation of drugs and drug addiction. Although drugs are a crucial element in all of Welsh's novels (including *The Acid House*, *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, *Ecstasy*, and *Filth*), my focus here is on *Trainspotting*. As the famous passage which precedes this dissertation illustrates, *Trainspotting* persuasively argues that the rules of modern existence have become so detrimental to the contemporary subject that even a potentially life-threatening alternative lifestyle (one in which heroin replaces capital as the organizing principle) may be more rewarding. The cultural effects of heroin are seen as a potentially viable alternative to choosing a normal life. Like the drug they take, Renton and company turn upon their own bodies—upon themselves—for transformation, suggesting a recognition that although their culture cannot be transformed into anything more tolerable, the way they participate in it can. Regardless of whether or not this actually turns out to be the case, the experiment is theoretically interesting primarily because it dares to suggest that our prevalent and wholly normalized way of living is precisely a choice and one that can

therefore be rejected in lieu of something else. Although *Trainspotting*'s use of this insight may seem rather self-evident when stated this plainly, the slippery mechanics of hegemony necessitate that it hide its status as a chosen way of living, that it masquerade as universal nature or common sense. In multiple inventive ways, what *Trainspotting* provides is precisely the opposite of common sense, an unnatural response to the world around us so as to reveal the constructedness of what Renton rejects.

One shared characteristic of many of these texts is that regardless of the specific manifestation of (physical or psychological) resistance that they present, each of them also involves the formation of various types of unconventional communities united around a shared discontent.³⁸ This is a gradual process in *Fight Club*, as the narrator tests various models with which to alleviate his consumption-induced misery. He moves from relative isolation to transitory and desperate participation in self-help groups for those suffering from illnesses he does not have, to his formative involvement in fight club and then Project Mayhem, the communal living experiment cum terrorist militia.

Trainspotting is similarly marked by a less formal but no less memorable or close-knit group of lifelong friends whose uneasy camaraderie fuels much of the text's action. This sense of community and its significance is even more pronounced in Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* and even in the movement under which it was produced, which will be the explicit focus of Chapter Four of my dissertation.

³⁸ The subversive potential of community is a recurring topic of various other recent films that present characters trying to find a way of living outside of their cultures' ideology. I am thinking here of Lukas Moodysson's *Together* (2000) and, particularly, Danny Boyle's adaptation of Alex Garland's cult novel, *The Beach* (2000), which can be read as a literal and indeed *geographic* search for a site outside of hegemonic discourse. The fantastic idea of escaping to some kind of 'real' existence in a completely isolated society serves similar purposes in this text as heroin use, faking 'idiocy' or masochistic violence does in those I will discuss.

In the truly bizarre film *The Idiots*, von Trier presents a group of Danish squatters who have dropped out of middle-class society and are loosely united by the possibility that taking turns “spassing,” or pretending to be mentally retarded, constitutes a genuine critique of, and alternative to, late-capitalist culture. *The Idiots* is a remarkable and provocative materialist critique of modern culture in its own right, but its meaning is significantly complicated by its centrality to the infamous Dogme95 movement. Any attempt to seriously consider von Trier’s most curious film must reckon with its theoretical origins. As such, the collective’s technical rules and goals are of great importance to my analysis. *The Idiots* is a singularly compelling expression of Dogme ideology, largely because it demonstrates an extra-cinematic political concern generally absent from the other works made under the Dogme mantle. Although all of the most celebrated Dogme films are (by virtue of the rules of their construction) *visually* unconventional, they are typically outstanding in an ideologically familiar way. Of the Dogme films that have achieved even a limited theatrical release [*The Celebration* (Thomas Vinterberg, 1998), *Mifune* (Soren Kragh Jacobsen, 1999), *Italian for Beginners* (Lone Scherfig, 2000) and *The King is Alive* (Kristian Levring, 2000)], only von Trier’s contribution seems to suggest the presence of more genuinely subversive desires located amid the technical specifications of ‘The Vow of Chastity’. I will argue that the meaningfully artless form and content of *The Idiots* are intertwined in a particularly compelling and revolutionary way, suggesting that von Trier believes the manifesto should be used to change both the world of film *and* the world in general. As with *Fight Club* and *Trainspotting*, *The Idiots* suggests that the way to accomplish this is through an unconventional attack on the politics of everyday life. The (relatively) finished product is

an uneasy synthesis that attempts to locate an elusive sense of the 'real' in our late-capitalist culture, one in which the oft critiqued "spassing" of the film's characters is ideologically reflected by the artfully amateurish precepts of its construction.

The cruelly antisocial and agitational antics of the "spassers" will be the point from which my analysis will develop, in two seemingly different yet ultimately aligned directions. I will first consider how the activity (or perhaps even the 'lifestyle') of "spassing" is drawn from the same recent currents of critical/revolutionary behaviors as are found in such other like-minded but technically subversive defamiliarizations as *Trainspotting* and *Fight Club*. Next, I will consider the ways in which the Situationist ideology/ hand-held aesthetic of *The Idiots* may constitute a genuine challenge both to the counter-cultural aspirations of these films and to the work of other Dogme directors. As von Trier suggests, it may well be the case that a genuinely revolutionary cinema (one that will occur both on and off the screen) cannot occur until drastic revisions are made to the representational practices of the contemporary film world.

My dissertation will conclude with an analysis of texts that seem to run counter to the earlier interests of my project but which are, in fact, firmly aligned with them. Rather than presenting characters who go to spectacular lengths to undermine or evade the influence of mass culture, I will look at three novels that are deeply critical of hegemony but which frame this critique by presenting characters who do not resist it but completely immerse themselves in it. This critical function of these texts emerges because, in each case, an escalating surrender to, and absorption by, the dominant culture occurs simultaneously and causally with encroaching madness. Palahniuk's *Survivor* and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* all cleverly deploy this equation as the

organizing principle of their narratives. Each novel deals with characters that are completely obsessed with and a part of mass culture—to an often comic degree—and as such they serve as satirically heightened exemplars of the ideological position of the typical contemporary subject. The heroes of these narratives each occupy a conventionally celebrated position of cultural dominance (respectively as a religious prophet cum media superstar, a Wall Street stock broker, and a famous model and actor) that facilitates their participation in the texts' cultural critique. However, each of these narratives is also marked by escalating bewilderment, fragmentation, and psychosis as the protagonists' overly intimate and formative relationship with their culture directly causes their descent into multiple and interrelated forms of paranoia, suicide, mass murder, terrorism and a complete detachment from reality.

Where I feel these texts are particularly useful is in their suggestion that our culture has become so corrupt that participation in it to anything even slightly more than a normal degree is enough, literally, to drive you mad. Collectively, they suggest that our society as a whole is (at least mildly) mentally ill, and this is a particularly useful trope with which to characterize late-capitalist culture at this historical moment. They will be considered particularly in terms of precisely how the subject functions in relation to their culture today, and will hopefully help explain how this dynamic operates and therefore how it may be resisted. And, of course, as with all of the core texts I will analyze, these works suggest why a transformation of the most radical kind is so desperately needed, by showing us what is at stake.

Despite their cult popularity and the controversy associated with these texts, their ideological critiques have received curiously little serious academic attention. As we shall

see, their political projects are often flatly rejected or denounced, and few have received anything even remotely approaching fair analysis of their cultural criticisms.

Furthermore, despite the similarities I have proposed here, they have not been considered as part of a collective project united by a similar desire to suggest extreme solutions to living critically within the postmodern condition. This is particularly unfortunate, as we are presently in a time when their non-fictional counterparts are achieving considerable critical and commercial success. A cursory glance down *The New York Times'* or *MacLeans* non-fictional bestseller lists reveals the extent to which many North American readers are unusually and uncharacteristically willing to accept that their culture is in a state of profound crisis. Possibly because of some acceleration of negative effects which such systems spawn or maybe because more and more people are finding themselves victims to these negative effects, such once sacred structures as democracy and capitalism are being substantially called into question. Although ostensibly a problem (or set of problems) of the 'real world,' contemporary film and fiction each have a good deal to say about the state of western culture, particularly because of their own generic contributions to our current state of being. Put (over) simply, if contemporary culture is widely considered to be a bit of a mess, it got there with a good deal of help from hegemonically indispensable ideologies propagated by cultural products. If it is to change at all, it is not unreasonable to claim that this will require using similar means in a diametrically opposite way, and this is precisely the potential of the subversive defamiliarizations I will be investigating. These texts all present us with individuals trying to develop a subjectivity outside of hegemony and, as such, each has the potential to offer fresh insights into the complex relationship between ourselves and our culture.

Chapter Two

Fight Club's Revolutionary Politics and the Subversive Defamiliarization of Everyday Life

People who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life, without understanding what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have a corpse in their mouth.

- Raul Vaneigem, "The Revolution of Everyday Life"

Fuck what you know. You need to forget what you know

- Tyler Durden, *Fight Club*

Fight Club is arguably the instance *par excellence* of the strain of recent texts I call subversive defamiliarizations. This chapter contains a lengthy analysis of the film's critique of late-capitalist consumer culture and revolutionary politics and is framed by a simultaneous engagement with an article that is intensely critical of the theoretical work done by *Fight Club*. I will address both popular and academic responses to it, responses that are divergent in compelling ways that raise important questions about the ways resistance can and can not be expressed today. Ultimately, I suggest that *Fight Club's* theorizing about (an admittedly and necessarily bizarre) revolutionary politics ought to be read as a unique attempt to defamiliarize the ideology of our culture, to make our lives and our selves strange to us. Rather than instinctively dismissing the violent and (self)destructive subversions it seems to advocate, we must interrogate the reasons why the film considers such measures, such dangerous *acts*, to be a necessary first step with which to reposition the subject in relation to (and impossibly outside of) contemporary hegemonic discourse.

Fight Club as a Cultural Product

By no means the first film to contain cultural critique, in many important respects *Fight Club* is nevertheless an anomaly. Although I will be considering the film as a strange kind of ideological companion piece to other subversive defamiliarizations, in some ways it is the exemplary instance of these works in (post)modern times. Although countless films and novels have challenged various aspects of contemporary culture and have featured strategies of resistance, *Fight Club* is an unusual cultural product in two specific regards.

First, it is a Hollywood production and accordingly was the subject of widespread public interest, which makes its odd content particularly uncharacteristic. It had a huge budget that permitted virtually unlimited access to all of the production resources associated with Hollywood at its most aesthetically extravagant, and featured superstar performers (Brad Pitt, Edward Norton) and a successful director on the rise (David Fincher). Its general release was accompanied by a massive, multifaceted and multimedia marketing campaign which, as is generally the case (but less self-evidently so), all but ensured its financial success. As we shall see, *The Idiots* was always doomed to fail commercially and the success of *Trainspotting* was widely considered a surprise, but *Fight Club*'s popularity was almost guaranteed by the economic logic which governs the contemporary film world. Regardless of whether or not this is *why* it was made (and it could be argued that a film of this sort only gets made if it is destined to achieve the requisite widespread public consumption), *Fight Club* was a hit long before it hit the big screen.

Second, and overtly, *Fight Club* is thematically and ideologically not a conventional blockbuster Hollywood release. Again, I do not wish to imply that film in general and mainstream film in particular has not been the venue for cultural critique. However, it is difficult to recall a film whose attack on the impact of consumer culture on the subject is as explicit and far-reaching as that found in *Fight Club*. Films from every era and genre adopt intensely and overtly critical positions toward specific negative manifestations of their culture's political or economic foundations.¹ Furthermore, an even greater number of works implicitly incorporate ideological critiques as subtexts to their explicit concerns.² The many effects of late-capitalism, however, are the *subject* of *Fight Club*. Although not unprecedented in the sense that the broad cultural critique at the center of *Fight Club* has many precedents in film history, the centrality and breadth of the critique *is* in many ways unprecedented.

Fight Club's central focus is the articulation of a sustained and explicit attack on capitalism in general and consumer culture in particular. It is a Hollywood film whose political position is not only explicitly adversarial but actively anarchistic. *Fight Club* not

¹ Consider, for instance, the number of films dealing specifically with the corrosive impact of television on contemporary culture [*Bamboozled* (Spike Lee, 2000), *Being There* (Hal Ashby, 1979), *The Cable Guy* (Ben Stiller, 1996), *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994), *Network* (Sidney Lumet, 1976), *To Die For* (Gus van Sant, 1995), *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998) and so on]. A similarly large number of popular movies have launched an explicit critical attack on various American military actions [for instance *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), *Born on the Fourth of July* (Oliver Stone, 1989), *Dr. Strangelove*, *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991), *MASH* (Robert Altman, 1970), *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1998), *Three Kings* (David O. Russell, 1999).]

² Again, countless instances of subtextual cultural critique of various sorts are present in such diverse works as *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999), *Bad Lieutenant* (Abel Ferrara, 1992), *Boyz in the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991), *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998), *Lovely and Amazing* (Nicole Holofcener, 2001), *Office Space* (Mike Judge, 1999), *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, 1998) and *Safe* (Todd Haynes, 1995).

only assumes that the most widely held and deeply entrenched values of our culture are fundamentally pathological, but also graphically documents (and seems to advocate) a diverse array of tactics including violence of many sorts with which to rail against these ideologies. Each of these statements can be (and have been) problematized, challenged, complicated and deconstructed, but each is also nevertheless true. *Fight Club*'s critique may (*also*) be dubious or problematic or superficial, but its scope, breadth and centrality make the film demonstrably unique.

Fight Club the film is based upon the debut novel of the same name written by mechanic turned author Chuck Palahniuk in 1996. After receiving generally positive reviews, the book gradually earned a substantial cult following by virtue of its dark humour and subversive appeal. Although the novel was necessarily changed in some telling ways by screenwriter Jim Uhls, David Fincher's adaptation generally retains many of the qualities of Palahniuk's text. The novel's dust jacket, which describes *Fight Club* as "the story of a godforsaken young man who discovers that his rage at living in a world filled with failure and lies cannot be pacified by an empty consumer culture," and this is as good a place from which to approach this text as any. The film begins, with a display of showy cinematic bravura that Fincher largely maintains throughout, inside the brain of our unnamed narrator³ played by Edward Norton—who I will call Jack in the interests of clarity, as do the film's credits—and we are thrust backwards as if (and literally) by an adrenaline shot. Through the use of digital effects, the camera pull sharply away and we are wrenched backwards through the maze of Jack's brain until we exit his body and

³ Or, rather, multiply named, since he falsely identifies himself in various different ways (as Cornelius, for example) at the support groups he attends. This is connected to the de-individuating that is both an effect of homogenizing consumerism and also important to

travel up the length of the gun which is sticking in Jack's mouth. At the other end of the gun is Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt). The two men are sitting on the top floor of a skyscraper in the business district of an unnamed city. Another digitally-generated shot then sweeps us magically through walls and into the basement of the building where we enter a van through a bullet-hole in the windshield. Here, we discover that many of the surrounding buildings are about to explode. In a voice-over, our narrator explains that Tyler is responsible. He has planted vast amounts of explosives at the base of these structures, has beaten and tied Jack to a chair and is preparing to watch the end of the world as we know it with him.

The action pauses, and Jack tells us that he is getting ahead of himself. He needs to go back through time and space and explain how he arrived in this strange predicament. He tells us that we first need to know about Marla. So we cut back an indeterminate amount of time, and Jack tells us about the resolutely unhappy life he had been leading. Since sometimes a cliché is precisely what's needed, it is perhaps most fitting to describe Jack as a corporate drone. He is a recall coordinator for a major automobile company, whose job it is to decide whether it will be cheaper for his company to recall a vehicle which they know is faulty or to simply pay the families of victims of accidents caused by said defect. From a certain angle, Jack's life is a dream. He is financially comfortable and owns a tasteful IKEA-filled condominium. His wardrobe, he tells us, is "getting quite respectable." But he can't sleep, afflicted by an insomnia that runs for weeks on end. Desperate for a cure out of fear for his life, he consults a doctor who tells him to get some exercise, chew valerian root and that "you can't die from

the formation of Project Mayhem, where no one is given a name and everyone is simply a "space monkey."

insomnia.” He tells Jack that if he wants to see real pain he should head to a local church one evening and attend a meeting of men suffering from testicular cancer. Jack takes the advice but quickly becomes addicted to attending various support groups for diseases he does not have (Lymphoma, Bowel Cancer, Brain Parasites, Tuberculosis, Melanoma), enjoying the heightened emotional intensity of interacting with people enduring real affliction and experiencing a cathartic release in the weeping these meetings inspire in him. Jack’s insomnia is cured. The fly in the ointment, however, is Marla Singer (Helena Bonham Carter), a fellow “tourist” whose presence throws into relief Jack’s own hypocrisy and prevents him from being able to fully let himself go. He confronts her, and after some comic bartering they agree to split the right to attend meetings evenly.

(Re)enter Tyler Durden, a charismatic, enigmatic soap dealer who sits next to Jack on one of his many work-related trips and becomes Jack’s “single serving friend.” They chat, and Tyler gives Jack his business card. For reasons he does not understand Jack decides to phone him when he returns home to discover that his condo (and *only his* condo) has been blown to bits by a mysterious blast. Homeless and without any of his beloved possessions, Jack meets Tyler in a low rent bar. Tyler is less than sympathetic to Jack’s sense of personal devastation and loss, and lectures him about the evils of a consumer culture in which he does not conventionally participate. As they leave, Tyler agrees to let Jack stay with him for a while, but only if he agrees to punch him as hard as he can. Jack reluctantly obliges, Tyler hits him back, and the first fight club is spontaneously born. Finding something liberating about the brawl, the two men continue to fight each other. Some intrigued onlookers join in, and after a short period of time new ‘chapters’ of fight clubs are popping up all over the city and then the country.

Jack moves permanently in to his new friend's home, a dilapidated and inhospitable house in "the toxic waste part of town," miles from anywhere. Tyler meets Marla by accident, after rescuing her from a suicide attempt. To Jack's horror, the two start a weird but intensely (loud) sexual relationship which disturbs Jack largely because they play mind-games with one another that remind him of the way his parents used to behave. While Jack manages to tenuously hold on to his office job (his boss disapproves of his bruised and battered face, his bloody clothes), Tyler works nights at jobs that allow him to reek low-level havoc on the symbols of the consumer culture that he abhors. He works as a projectionist so he can splice frames of hardcore pornography into family films. He works as a waiter in an upscale hotel where he sneezes, farts, pisses, and ejaculates into various gourmet dishes. The secret to Tyler's thriving soap business, Jack discovers, is that he uses creamy human fat, stolen from a dumpster behind a liposuction clinic.

Fight clubs proliferate at an alarming rate, providing Tyler (and, by extension, Jack) with a cult following of disillusioned men whom he promptly transforms into a counter-cultural militia in order to attack various structures and ideologies of capitalism, which he hopes to replace with a hazily defined anarchist utopia. He calls this still more radical offshoot of the fight clubs "Project Mayhem," and their subversions quickly escalate. Beginning with essentially mischievous forms of what Kalle Lasn calls adbusting or culture jamming (politically informed reworkings of commercial property, minor acts of vandalism directed at symbols of capitalism, the destruction of the iconography and expressions of consumerism), Project Mayhem's activities become more dangerous, which unsettles Jack. Although he has been somewhat (and much to his

chagrin) cut out of the loop controlled by Tyler and has begun to ignore the actions of the legions of shaven-headed “space monkeys”⁴ that now share their home, the death of one of the group’s members (Bob, a friend of Jack’s from his time at group therapy sessions) forces him to reexamine the work they are doing at Tyler’s behest. He seems genuinely flabbergasted to discover that fight clubs now exist all across the country and that countless cells of Project Mayhem are operating in far more menacing ways: kidnapping and threatening all those who oppose them, and ultimately planning to disable culture by destroying the headquarters of the credit-card companies that signify the economic base of late-capitalist culture.

This development understandably terrifies Jack so he goes in search of Tyler, who has all but vanished. Using ticket stubs from Tyler’s travels as a clue to his whereabouts, Jack follows the group’s leader across America. At each fight club he visits, the members respond strangely to his questions about Tyler, and after an alarming conversation with Marla, he is ultimately forced to realize that he *is* the man he has been seeking. Tyler is a part of him: a strange kind of spectral double who appears when he thinks he is asleep in order to articulate forcefully that which troubles Jack. Although the precise mechanisms through which this splitting occurred are largely unexplored, it becomes clear that Tyler is a fantasy created by Jack’s imagination, a subconscious projection of all that he wishes he were. This recognition, however, is not as useful as it first seems because Tyler is still intent on blowing up great sections of the business districts of major cities. After much scrambling around trying to stop him(self) from committing these actions, he finally

⁴ In Palahniuk’s novel, this term is initially used to refer to the alienating effect of modern labour, wherein we simply perform a rigidly defined task but have no understanding of its broader significance in the chain of production. In the film, Tyler uses the term to

confronts his double but is beaten into submission (Jack is of course really beating himself, as he always has been). Tyler ties Jack to a chair and positions him on the top floor of a centrally located skyscraper so that they can watch the end of the economic world together. In a strange (and arguably nonsensical) moment, Jack realizes that the way to destroy his alter ego is to shoot himself in the head, which he does. Tyler is killed but Jack survives, barely. Marla is brought to the group's leader by members of Project Mayhem who (rightly) perceive her as a threat to their goals. It is, however, too late to do anything to stop the explosions. Jack apologizes to Marla, explaining that she met him "at a weird time in [his] life." The couple hold hands and look out of the window to see society come crashing down around them.

Reading *Fight Club*

Given the strangeness (particularly for a major Hollywood release) of its content, and the largely unprecedented articulation of cultural critique as its explicit subject, critical response to the film was sharply divided. As is typically the case when any film is released which violates or challenges (or even addresses) the foundational values of a culture, *Fight Club* encountered significant criticism on the grounds that it was too wildly excessive an attack. A glowing review of the film which appeared in *Empire* magazine and discussed the divergent critical responses elicited by its debut at the Venice Film Festival reflects the admiration and division it generated: "Bare-knuckle boxing. Consumer terrorism. Fascist overtones. Subliminal imagery. Nitro-glycerine recipes. Brad Pitt. Ed Norton. David Fincher. Meat Loaf with tits. The right-wing press think it's

emphasize both his soldiers willingness "to sacrifice [them]selves for the greater good" and to defamiliarize the popular notion of individuality as an inherently positive quality.

the most dangerous film ever made. It's called *Fight Club*. And it's a comedy" (Wise 1). The most memorable and widely cited instance of this outraged response comes from Alexander Walker's review in the London *Evening Standard*. A clearly unsettled Walker argued that "The sound of bones crunching is like a building site....It is not simply the unbelievable brutality of the film that has caused critics to wonder if Rupert Murdoch's company, 20th Century Fox, which produced it, knew what it was doing. The movie is not only anti-capitalist but anti-society and, indeed, anti-God" (Walker, in Wise 2). Despite easily dismissable rants of this sort (correct though they may be in their accounts of the film's ideology), critics in the popular media generally admired the film's visual and thematic inventiveness, recognizing its genuine if conflicted attempt to accomplish something ideologically different from mainstream cinema's typical aspirations and parameters. In a review for *Sight and Sound* entitled "So Good it Hurts," Amy Taubin addresses the film's visual and ideological novelty in a manner that encapsulates most popular critical reactions to *Fight Club*.

What's exciting about *Fight Club* is that it "screws around with your bio-rhythms"- to borrow a phrase from the Chuck Palahniuk novel... Like the novel, the film disrupts narrative sequencing and expresses some pretty subversive, right-on-the-zeitgeist ideas about masculinity and our name-brand, bottom-line society – ideas you're unlikely to find so openly broadcast in any other Hollywood movie.

...what's most innovative about *Fight Club* is the way, at moments, it seems like the projection of an extremely, associative train of thought that can back up and hurtle forward and switch tracks in an instant....In the opening scene, seconds after being ejected from Jack's brain, we hear something about a bomb in the basement and suddenly we're plunged through the window, down 30 storys, through the sidewalk into the basement, through a bullet hole in the van with the explosives and then out the other side. The sequence, which is digitally created from a series of still photographs, is both astonishing and oddly mundane in the sense that it's a fair representation of the visual component

of everyday thought processes. Still, one needs a new vocabulary to describe the vertiginous depiction of space and time in *Fight Club*. Pans and tilts and tracks won't do. (Taubin 1-3)

The controversy about some of its more radical suggestions of resistance to consumerism were framed in terms of this underlying admiration of the film's overall originality, about which Taubin ultimately concludes, "*Fight Club* is nothing if not a glimpse of [the] future" (3).

Although many of *Fight Club*'s most enthusiastic supporters and promoters were sympathetic to the motivations which inspired the film's critique of consumer culture, many also felt it imperative to qualify their praise with a denunciation of some or all of the specific acts against late-capitalism that it depicts. Damon Wise's review included a caveat of this sort, similarly inspired by a strange sense of social responsibility: "yes, it ends with Tyler taking it all too far, starting his own underground anarchist group ('Project Mayhem') and waging a surreal, dangerous war on corporate America" (Wise 1). Amy Taubin echoes this sentiment by arguing that the progression from fight clubs to Project Mayhem is characterized by a dangerous excess which the film does not condone—"Tyler's nihilism and incipient fascism are not the values *Fight Club* espouses" (Taubin 3)—and is caused by the regrettable fact that "Tyler's tendency to megalomania spins out of control" (Taubin 2).⁵ This appraisal is reinforced by its pairing with an interview with David Fincher who is further required to repeatedly denounce as a gross misstep the action of the second half of the film and sever the relation between his

⁵ This seems at least somewhat untrue, given the fact that the values of *Fight Club* are, for the most part, Tyler's values. It also reinforces the notion that the extreme actions at its conclusion are a deviation from that which preceded it, which is also problematic

film's early critique of the world from Tyler's ultimate response to it: "Do I think that people who are frustrated and disenfranchised should blow up buildings? No. Do I care if people who are consenting adults have this fight club? No...I think the movie is moral and responsible" (Fincher, in Taubin 5). Similarly, Fincher defends the film from accusations of fascism in the interview which accompanied the review in *Empire*: "Isn't the point of fascism to say, 'This is the way we should be going'? But this movie couldn't be further from offering *any* kind of solution" (Fincher, in Wise 4).

This perceived necessity to state and restate the film's ultimate disapproval of much of its actual content is reflected in almost every interview with all those involved in the production. This is particularly the case with Chuck Palahniuk, who originally instigated the whole nasty affair and is therefore most responsible for explaining himself. During an online CNN question and answer session with Palahniuk, he is asked "Do you worry about fanatics trying to follow in the Brad Pitt character's footsteps and causing social disruption?", and replies "Hmm. Yes, I do worry but, it is demonstrated by Tyler's death that Tyler's way ultimately doesn't work" (www.joblo.com). In an interview with the website *The Onion*, this sentiment is repeated: "O: A lot of *Fight Club*'s fans seem to appreciate the movie on a lower level than Kierkegaard. How do you deal with fans who just see it as a call to anarchy and violence?", to which the author (disappointingly, it must be said) answers "Wow. Bummer. I can't control that, you know?"

(www.theonionavclub.com) These, then, are the two basic strains which characterize popular responses to *Fight Club*. On the one hand, it is deserving of praise for the originality of its vision and technical construction. On the other, it is recognized as being

given the extent to which the explosions are perfectly consistent with the logic the film establishes throughout.

a potentially dangerous cultural product, characterized by excessive responses which must be critically contained and placed within a delimiting context the that film itself is presumed to lack.

The entry of *Fight Club* into the very different sphere of scholarly criticism generated a wholly different response, one which is in some ways opposite to what the film came to mean in popular critical discourses. Whereas the film's critique of late-capitalism and consumer culture was, as I have suggested, unique in the realm of mass culture and therefore a signifier of originality, this quality was understandably downplayed in scholarly responses where such discourses are more prevalent. To the academics whose critical interests would lead them to comment on *Fight Club* in the first place, the only thing that was novel about the film's critique was the location of it in the public domain of the multiplex. Its presence there functioned, uneasily for many, as a sort of popular testing ground for the way in which cultural criticism may be enacted outside of academia, how it might be articulated and received by a populace less familiar with work of this sort and therefore unable to locate it amongst a broader contemporary analysis of the operations of hegemony.

Fight Club, then, is frequently read as cultural critique of and for the masses, and is of academic interest primarily along these grounds. Although I hope to show that this approach to the film may be reductively narrow and predicated on notions about the value of disparate levels and expressions of critical discourse, I will frame my analysis of the film by interrogating the kinds of scholarly responses it generated. My interest here is twofold. First, I am concerned with establishing *Fight Club* as a subversive defamiliarization that, contrary to many summations, offers an important and original

theoretical account of the relationship between the contemporary subject and his culture. Rather than reading the film as theorizing the limits of resistance only in a simplified form, I will suggest that approaching *Fight Club* in a way that locates it in a position subordinate to theory is a genuine and damaging loss. Second, I shall focus primarily on one critique of the film which is characteristic not only of approaches to the movie in question but to subversive defamiliarizations in general. In this way, I hope to draw attention to some of the recurring assumptions that underscore a certain strain of cultural criticism, assumptions which have a lot to say about the kinds of resistance that are imaginable, authorized, or even possible today.

Denouncing *Fight Club*

Fight Club has been critiqued in various academic journals and books from an array of divergent perspectives. In *The Cinema of Generation X*, for instance, Peter Hanson finds fault with the film along the same critical lines as did many popular critics who felt its vision was ultimately too extreme and potentially dangerous to be palatable. He more or less dismisses the “skewed vision” it presents as a fantasy that is unreflective of the ‘real world,’ because “the disharmonies of modern life are exaggerated to hyperbolic and even nonsensical proportions” (Hanson 7). Christopher Sharrett takes the position in “End of Story: The Collapse of Myth in Postmodern Narrative Film” that, like the apocalyptic Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle *End of Days* (Peter Hyams, 1999), “*Fight Club* disingenuously appropriate[s] popular and academic discourses about the postmodern situation, but only to serve the hoariest ideological agenda” (Sharrett 326). As curious as this comparison is, it is a less strange strategy of denunciation than that offered by Ralph

E. Rodriguez in “Men With Guns: The Story John Sayles Can’t Tell.” Rodriguez makes the patently ridiculous and (necessarily) unsubstantiated argument that “*Fight Club* feigns to be political, but it undermines its own critique of consumerism through an endless chain of product placements. Its conclusion shrouds itself in a far too comfortable cloak of cynicism and despair” (Rodriguez 168). Critics who have adopted a more even and sustained view of the film’s strengths and weaknesses have also found many ideological contradictions that undermine its ostensible project. In “The Phallus Unfetishized: The End of Masculinity As We Know It in Late- 1990s ‘Feminist’ Cinema,” Alexandra Juhasz offers a witty and intensely satirical reading of the film’s peculiar gender politics. Although I will address these arguments more thoroughly later in this chapter, Slavoj Žižek’s complicated response to the film (or, rather, his complicated response to Bulent Diken and Carsten Bagge Laustsen already complicated—and already Žižekian—response to the film, “Enjoy your Fight!—*Fight Club* as a symptom of the Network Society”) suggests that the early radicalism of the masochistic fist-fighting is undone by the sadistic and orderly subversions of Project Mayhem.

However, the most far-reaching and sustained attack on the film’s politics is Henry A. Giroux’s “Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders: *Fight Club*, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence.”⁶ I will focus on this particular account largely because of its negativity and the fact that it is representative of assumptions that underline

⁶ This article is an expanded version of a shorter and infinitely more reasonable appraisal of the film entitled “Ikea Boy Fights Back: *Fight Club*, Consumerism, and the Political Limits of Nineties Cinema.” This earlier essay, co-written with Imre Szeman (who is strangely un-credited in the later text) points to some of the strange connections the film makes between masculinity and consumerism but makes none of the leaps in logic performed by Giroux. In the interests of full disclosure, I should note that Imre Szeman is a member of the committee charged with supervising this dissertation.

other critiques.⁷ Although Giroux dislikes the film and accordingly attacks it from every conceivable angle, his response can be somewhat segmented according to several broad problems he feels are most damaging to *Fight Club*'s ostensible goals and to its impact on the culture of which it is a part. First, he situates the film's ideology amid a neoliberal⁸ discourse, the emergence of which has facilitated the erosion of the public sphere and its attendant social support networks by engendering in 'the masses' a sense of pervasive hopelessness about the opportunities for democratic cultural transformation. Second, he suggests both implicitly and explicitly that *Fight Club* is a clichéd cultural product and represents one of a long line of similarly themed and ideologically constructed films to be released in the past decade. Third, he takes issue with what he reads as *Fight Club*'s deeply conventional view of gender politics, particularly its association of masculinity with competitive violence and of femininity with a passivity which he feels authorizes violence directed at women. Fourth, he maintains that the film's violence and overall content is actively dangerous from a pedagogical perspective, a perspective it takes too lightly. Fifth, (although this critique is also latent in many of the others) he believes *Fight Club* does the ideological opposite of what it purports to do. And, finally, he argues that the film ultimately undoes itself because of its complete failure to meaningfully address

⁷ I use negativity in a double sense here, both with reference to Giroux's emphatic dislike of the film and his attendant suspicions of its cultural effects, but more importantly in the sense that he is fundamentally concerned with what the film does not do, what it does not contain. His critique is, therefore, of what the film isn't, which is often a fair and productive approach. *Fight Club* does not, however, easily offer itself to this kind of reading since, as I shall suggest, that which is missing from the film according to Giroux is actually the film's subject, its *raison d'être*, that which it is always speaking about.

⁸ The 'neoliberal' and its opposite, the 'progressive' are the two principal recurring ideological figures in the theoretical *dramatis personae* of Giroux's article. Although this view is slightly oversimplified, the former are responsible for our culture's woes (and include the film and the popular critics who defend it) and the latter are those who do the theoretical work necessary to undo the damage done by the former.

that which (he suggests) is ostensibly its political subject: the possible range of expressions of resistance to an abhorrent and disabling consumer culture. Using Giroux's analysis as a starting point, I will suggest other ways (both more and less obvious) of reading the film which suggest that, to a large extent, the fatal absences that Giroux finds in the film are precisely what *Fight Club* is about: its weaknesses are its subject.

Giroux begins his critique with a persuasive and well-articulated reckoning of the precarious position of the contemporary subject within the culture that has constructed him. Neoliberal discourse, he asserts, has documented and enabled the construction of a culture in which the rules of hegemonic dominance are now manifested in different ways. He describes our present cultural moment as one in which:

the greatest danger to human freedom and democracy no longer appears to come from the power of the over-zealous state eager to stamp out individual freedom and critical inquiry in the interest of loyalty and patriotism. Totalitarianism⁹ no longer breeds a contempt for the virtues of individualism, all things private, and the dynamics of self-interest. On the contrary, totalitarianism now resides in a thorough dislike for all things social, public, and collective.... Agency has now been privatized and personal liberty atomized and removed from broader considerations about the ethical and political responsibility of citizens to defend those vital institutions that expand the rights and services central to a meaningful democracy. Stripped of its political possibilities and social underpinnings, freedom finds few opportunities for translating private worries into public concerns or individual discontent into collective struggle.
(Giroux 1)

⁹ Giroux's use of the term "totalitarianism" to describe contemporary American life is problematic for numerous reasons, not the least of which is the centrality to his critique of *Fight Club* of the idea (he finds) in the film that it presents culture as totalizing. For instance, he notes "the film depicts capitalism as sutured, impenetrable, and totalizing," (15) and again, "power is never totalizing" (25). In a more general sense, this terminology also suggests precisely the (mis)use of the concept critiqued by Slavoj Žižek in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*: namely, that it is used by Western cultures as a

For Giroux, this development is occurring alongside (and permitting) a series of devastating and socially disempowering political and economic policies whose effect on the daily life (and psyche) of the vast majority of the populace is hobbling. In this new landscape, “[h]umanitarian concerns are largely impotent against the driving interests of capital and its voracious search for new markets and greater profits” (3). The psychological effect of these cultural shifts is as deleterious to the individual as it is hegemonically useful. Giroux outlines the insidiousness of this impact by suggesting that the “ascendancy of neoliberalism and corporate culture into every aspect of American life not only consolidates economic power in the hands of the few” (3). It also ensures that “social visions are dismissed as hopelessly out of date” (1) by a public characterized by “a growing sense of insecurity, cynicism, and political retreat” (4). This socioeconomic context, within which Giroux tells us *Fight Club* must be read, is painstakingly defined with all the alarming clarity and force we expect from cultural critique of this sort. A lengthy reference is required here to do justice to the rhetorical power of his depiction of the contemporary cultural landscape as a:

culture of cynicism, boredom, and despair. Americans are now convinced that they have little to hope for—and gain from—the government, nonprofit public spheres, democratic associations, or other nongovernmental social forces. With few exceptions, the project of democratic transformations has fallen into disrepute in the popular imagination as the logic of the market undermines the most basic social solidarities....the call for self-reliance betrays a weakened state that neither provides adequate safety nets for its populace (especially those who are young, poor, or marginalized) nor gives any indication that it needs or is willing to care for its citizens. In this scenario, private interests trump social need, and profit becomes more important than social justice...The “brutal tearing up of social solidarities” is mediated through the force of corporate structural power and commercial values that both

juxtaposition (in all its forms; socialism, fascism) to democracy, in a way that allows for the automatic and uncritical privileging of the latter.

dominate and weaken those competing public spheres and value systems that are critical to a just society and to democracy itself. The liberal democratic vocabulary of rights, entitlements, social provisions, community, social responsibility, living wage, job security, equality, and justice seems oddly out of place in a country in which the promise of democracy has been replaced by the lure of the lottery and the *Dow Jones Industrial average*, reinforced by a pervasive fear and insecurity about the present, and a deep-seated skepticism in the public mind that the future holds nothing beyond a watered-down version of the present. Within the prevailing discourse of neoliberalism that has taken hold of the public imagination, there is no vocabulary for political or social transformation; there is no collective vision; there is no social agency to challenge the ruthless downsizing of jobs or to resist the ongoing liquidation of job security; there are no spaces from which to struggle against the elimination of benefits for people now hired on a strictly part-time basis. Moreover, against the reality of low-wage jobs, the erosion of social provisions for a growing number of people, and the expanding war against young people of color, the market-driven consumer juggernaut continues to mobilize desires in the interest of producing market identities and market relationships that, as Theodor Adorno once put it, ultimately appear as nothing less than “a prohibition on thinking” itself. (4-5)

The alarming state of affairs forcefully described here is important to my analysis of Giroux’s reading of *Fight Club* in that it inadvertently exposes some of the ideological assumptions that inform his critique. What he eventually *does* with this characterization of American culture and *Fight Club*’s implication in reinscribing the values that maintain it is a lot less effective than the unfolding of the sweeping critique itself. Most obviously problematic is the fact that his argument can be seen to rhetorically duplicate that which it condemns in *Fight Club*. By despairingly presenting the isolating world of consumer culture in a familiar and persuasive way, Giroux can *also* be seen to reinscribe the neoliberal ideology which ensured (and ensures) that these dire conditions are prominent in the first place. The initial rebuttal to this notion is that his argument uses neoliberal

ideology parenthetically (as a subject for his differently informed theorizing) whereas, in his reading, *Fight Club* never speaks from a position outside of this discourse, although I will later suggest the many ways in which the film plays with this notion.

In the previously cited excerpt, as in the entire article, it is clearly hard to delineate between Giroux's critical mimicry of neoliberal ideology as he defines it (by offering in his own terms the kinds of values this position designates) and his own critique of culture. As I have suggested, he detaches himself from the neoliberal ideology which is at the root of his critique of *Fight Club* by repeatedly identifying himself as its opposite (the figure of 'the progressive'). Unlike the film, Giroux is able to recognize the deleterious effects of neoliberal ideology on the culture within which it functions, and is able to step outside its pervasive logic and recognize the ways in which it can be subverted or overthrown.¹⁰ We are left with only those traces and hints which he uses to explain the film's lack on this front. However, *Fight Club*'s subject *is* this lack, this inability to articulate a critique or devise a form of resistance from outside of hegemonic ideology. The extreme and seemingly nonsensical actions of its characters attest to their recognition that unconventional forms of political practice are made necessary by the contemporary shape of our culture.

Giroux reads this position as the fundamental flaw within the film's critique and in doing so often identifies precisely the ideological position that is its compelling starting point. Ironically, then, when he suggests the kind of alternatives to, and criticism of, consumerism that *should* be present in a critique such as that attempted by *Fight Club* but are not, he is entirely correct. *Fight Club* is not interested in conventional discourses

of political transformation precisely because it operates from the assumption and is made necessary by the fact that such registers of dissent are functionally useless today. As such, Giroux is right to note that “*Fight Club* has nothing to say about the structural violence of unemployment, job insecurity, cuts in public spending, or the destruction of institutions capable of defending social provisions and the public good” (5). For the most part, all of his claims are accurate and revealing:

While *Fight Club* registers a form of resistance to the rampant commodification and alienation of contemporary neoliberal society, it ultimately has little to say about those diverse and related aspects of consumer culture and contemporary capitalism structured in iniquitous power relations, material wealth, or hierarchical social formations. *Fight Club* largely ignores issues surrounding the break up of labor unions, the slashing of the U.S workforce, extensive plant closings, downsizing, outsourcing, the elimination of the welfare state, the attack on people of color, and the growing disparities between rich and poor. All of these issues get factored out of *Fight Club*'s analysis of consumerism and capitalist exploitation.(13)

Although he concedes that the film does contain “a superficial gesture toward social critique,” (3) it ultimately fails because it “cannot imagine a politics that connects to democratic movements” (12). Rather, I hope to demonstrate that it only *exists* because “it cannot imagine a politics that connects to democratic movements,” and is about how we deal with and express opposition to these cultural conditions.

Fight Club is not interested in other things as well, and these criticisms are more problematic. It is “marked by an absence of working men and women who embody a

¹⁰ As we might anticipate, *Fight Club* is treated in a similar but inverted way: he tells us that it is, despite efforts to the contrary, a product of neoliberalism and then explains how this is the case in a way that simultaneously identifies himself as non-neoliberal.

sense of agency and empowerment” (14)¹¹ and “lacks a language for translating private troubles into public rage” (14).¹² It “does not rupture conventional ways of thinking about violence”(17) and, indeed, “Nor is there any incentive ...to consider how violence can be resisted, alleviated and challenged through alternative institutional forms and social practices” (17). It is also guilty of exhibiting a “lack of discrimination among diverse forms of violence...coupled with a moral indifference to how violence produces human suffering”(17).¹³ Although I will address many of these claims at length later, what must be kept in mind is that Giroux does not approach the film on its own terms—as a cultural artifact about culture—but consistently reads it by comparison to an as yet unconstructed film. This imaginary product, one not bound up in the neoliberal assumptions that he feels underscore *Fight Club*, always hovers in the background of his paper but never surfaces. At times, Giroux even seems to allude to films that possess the characteristics of the kind of cinema that could articulate a theoretically sound cultural critique but never by name. He is, however, understandably critical of those films he feels are similar to

¹¹ This is a difficult point to prove since it seems patently not true. Is Tyler Durden not the example *par excellence* in recent film history of a working man who embodies a sense of agency and empowerment, and must *Fight Club* not be seen as generously populated with characters attempting to do precisely that?

¹² Again, this is a tough sell to make to anyone familiar with the film whose entire focus is about “translating private troubles into public rage.” Although the ways in which they do this may be problematic, that does not mean it is not happening. How else can we read the motivations for, and decidedly public actions of, Project Mayhem? Why else are those credit card companies very publicly destroyed at the film’s conclusion other than as expression of precisely this gesture?

¹³ While Giroux finds in *Fight Club* many things that are not there but should be, none are more problematic than his association of the film’s violence with spousal abuse, gay-bashing, and “the increasing use of violence to keep in check marginalized groups such as young black males, who are now viewed as a threat to order and stability” (24). None of these actions are actually depicted in the film, nor does it implicitly open itself to such a reading, so Giroux utilizes the same negative logic with which to connect *Fight Club* to abhorrent real world events, by its failure “to make [violence] problematic” (17) and by “remaining silent about how such violence works to serve male power” (19).

Fight Club,¹⁴ which he unconvincingly suggests is one of many to cover this ideological terrain. Failing to recognize the ways in which *Fight Club* is unique, he misses the opportunity to ask why this may be the case, which is arguably the most interesting thing about the film *and* one of the questions it attempts to address.

Although I have already discussed the originality of *Fight Club*'s ideological concerns within the venue of mass culture (an originality that is largely one of breadth and quantity), Giroux's critique of the film is unusually predicated on arguing against this uniqueness in ways that warrant further analysis.¹⁵ He builds his argument by dismissing the obvious view of the film and noting, "Contrary to the reviews accompanying the film's premiere that celebrated it as a daring social critique, *Fight Club* has nothing to say about..." (5). Rather, Giroux suggests that the film is one of many to cover the thematic terrain that it takes as its subject:

Fight Club—along with films such as *American Beauty*, *Rogue Trader*, *Boiler Room*, and *American Psycho*—inaugurates a new subgenre of cult film that combines a fascination with the spectacle of violence, enlivened through tired narratives about the crisis of masculinity, along with a superficial gesture toward social critique designed to offer the tease of a serious independent or art film. (5)

¹⁴ By which he means, of course, flawed in similar ways.

¹⁵ As I have shown, popular responses to the film invariably acknowledged the rarity of the kind of sustained and explicit social critique it contained. This aspect was also assumed by those academics who appreciated *Fight Club*'s commentary, even if they found it in some ways lacking. Slavoj Žižek begins his appraisal by recognizing that the film's unusual content make it "an extraordinary achievement for Hollywood" (Žižek 250). Although they feel that the move from fight clubs to Project Mayhem ultimately contains the film's ideological threat, Bulent Diken and Carsten Bagge Laustsen nonetheless concede that "At first sight *Fight Club*- does not really fit into the universe of Hollywood" (Diken and Laustsen 8).

Although all of these films have occasional and primarily incidental points of overlap, their similarities are typically tangential.¹⁶ Neither *Rogue Trader* (James Dearden, 1999) nor *Boiler Room* (Ben Younger, 2000) contain significant social critique, and certainly not remotely to the extent that *Fight Club* does, however ‘superficial’ that critique may be. Although widespread, *American Psycho*’s (Mary Harron, 2000) interest in the crisis of masculinity and social critique is certainly not as explicit as that offered in *Fight Club*.¹⁷ While *American Beauty* does contain elements of cultural critique, they are again fundamentally unlike those offered in Fincher’s film because they are more properly a secondary theme than they are the film’s primary subject. *American Beauty* is interested in how one man tries to solve the problems particular to his life, only some of which are posited as cultural concerns, whereas *Fight Club*’s interests are much broader.

The comparisons he claims exist but does not actually make are also telling. His assertion that *Fight Club* contains “a superficial gesture toward social critique designed to offer the tease of a serious independent or art film” presupposes the existence of a subgenre of independent films that offer non-superficial social critiques. It is certainly true that many structural mechanisms prevent Hollywood films *in particular* from taking as their subject the explicit exploration and endorsement of an oppositional political

¹⁶ It is also worth noting that Giroux later compares *Fight Club*’s utilization of “hyper-masculinity”(21) and “the reactionary mythology of warrior culture”(21) with “a host of Hollywood movies celebrating rogue warriors such as *Lethal Weapon*, *Missing in Action*, *Robocop*, and *Rambo*”(21). Again, in a footnote, he discusses more links, to the “scuzz cinema” of Quentin Tarantino, and notes that their “infatuation with violence, cynicism, glitz, and shoot-outs in diners got a remake by adding a more updated gesture towards social relevance—that is, a critique of suburban life, consumerism, and so forth—that can be seen in such films as *Fight Club*.”(26)

¹⁷ Although I will discuss *American Psycho*’s strange form of social critique at length in my conclusion, suffice it to say that it is primarily implicit and structural, whereas *Fight Club*’s is unusual for precisely the opposite reason, because of how superficial it is (in the best sense of that term).

stance. However, it is similarly true that independent film is widely (and surprisingly) disinterested in critiquing consumer culture in as sustained and overt way as does *Fight Club*. It is true that a film containing similar elements to the politically-charged content and adversarial stance of *Fight Club* would be less out of place in an arthouse cinema than in a suburban multiplex, but this remains a largely hypothetical debate. Giroux's critique is quite explicit about what is missing from *Fight Club*, but his prescriptive approach (wherein he explains what the film should have included) ironically only really proves the extent to which it occupies a rare position in contemporary film culture. Furthermore, it points suggestively to what goes unarticulated in his analysis but which is central to mine, as it is to all of the subversive defamiliarizations I will be examining, the curious difficulties inherent in presenting or enacting cultural resistance at a time when it is perhaps most required.

It is not only in its entirety that Giroux finds *Fight Club* unoriginal but also in particular details of the critique it attempts. This aspect of his argument is suggestive of the disparate presence of cultural criticism in academic and popular discourses and fuels his dismissal of *Fight Club* as being theoretically problematic. What needs to be addressed here, and disruptively reintroduced into his ideological position, is the way he characterizes the general audience of the film as likely to respond to the issues raised by *Fight Club* in the same way that he does. Tyler Durden's position in the film's register as subversive cultural critique incarnate is obviously not something Giroux is inclined to endorse. Accordingly, his characterization of *Fight Club*'s (anti)hero is rendered with a fair amount of condescension:

Tyler is the antithesis of Jack—a bruising, cocky, brash soap salesman, part-time waiter, and movie projectionist with a

whiff of anarchism shoring up his speech, dress, and body language. If Jack is a model of packaged conformity and yuppie depthlessness, Tyler is a no-holds-barred charismatic rebel.... Mesmerized by Tyler's high-octane talk and sense of subversion, Jack exchanges phone numbers with him.(10)

Although it is easy for someone broadly familiar with cultural criticism to dismiss Tyler's contributions as overly reminiscent of much contemporary analysis, Giroux's response does not reflect how unfamiliar *Fight Club's* theorizing would appear to the majority of those who saw it, which raises questions about the film's actual pedagogical function.¹⁸ It further does not acknowledge the complex ways in which *Fight Club* plays with the tensions created by articulating a critique of consumer culture which is embodied by an iconic emblem of that culture (Brad Pitt). As we shall see, this is one of the film's most interesting components and opens up critical possibilities obviously unavailable in conventional scholarly analysis.

His description of the conversation the two men have immediately before they form the first fight club similarly assumes the superficial familiarity of Tyler's subversive appeal but is now explicitly supplemented with an attack on the actual theoretical value of Tyler's critique. Tyler's memorable speech is cast as "a five-minute cliché-ridden tirade against the pitfalls of bourgeois life, mixing critique with elements of his own philosophical ramblings about the pitfalls of masculinity" (10). This last aspect of Tyler's commentary is perhaps the most problematic for Giroux, since the film's reactionary gender politics are identified repeatedly as its single most dangerous contribution to

¹⁸ This refusal to take seriously the diverse ways in which the film was popularly interpreted is precisely the opposite of the approach I hope to take in my discussion of the ways in which subversive defamiliarizations operate in the public imagination. Indeed, an integral component of my desire to incorporate a politicized version of defamiliarization is its status a concept that, amongst other things, is inherently concerned with the effect of texts upon readers which must surely be taken into account.

popular culture, particularly when coupled by equally conservative ideas about the place of violence. Giroux suggests that *Fight Club* was released at a historical moment “when the crisis of masculinity is widely perceived as the most important manifestation of changing economic conditions” (22). His emphasis on the film’s pedagogical function necessitates a questioning of this assumption that the public’s understanding of culture is informed by the same reading history as his. Are, for instance, the people who *Fight Club* taught one and the same group who “widely perceive” that the crisis of masculinity is the “most important manifestation of changing economic conditions”? Indeed, are these filmgoers in fact so familiar with this idea that they perceive *Fight Club* as a showcase for *yet another* “tired narrative...about the crisis of masculinity”? (5)¹⁹ Is the audience the film was received by really one for whom Tyler’s critique of contemporary consumer culture is “cliché-ridden”? Given some of the problems I have pointed to regarding this assumption, and Giroux’s (necessary) inability to provide even one example of a film which offers a theoretically sound critique of consumer culture, the ways in which *Fight Club* resonated in the public imagination need to be more thoroughly examined precisely because the public imagination (and its limitations) is that which the film purports to address.

¹⁹ One of the factors which makes such a position untenable is that Giroux understandably locates Susan Faludi’s *Stiffed* at the epicentre of this connection between consumerism and a crisis in contemporary masculinity. Although I am still very far from convinced that the public ‘widely perceives’ this link, if it does have any significant social presence then (as Giroux suggests) Faludi’s book would be the starting point of the debate. However, given that her book and *Fight Club* were released in the same year (1999), it seems unlikely that even a public immersed in cultural theory would yet have grown tired

**Without You I'm Nothing:
Fight Club and the Defamiliarization of Late-Capitalist Subjectivity**

Listen up maggots, you are not special, you are not a beautiful or unique snowflake, you are the same decaying organic matter as everything else. We are the all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world. We are all part of the same compost heap.

- Tyler Durden, *Fight Club*

Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political 'double bind' which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures.... We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries.

- Michel Foucault, *The Subject and Power*

Fight Club's admittedly strange ideas about gender and its connection to a late-capitalist subjectivity constitute an insurmountable problematic to Giroux, who finds the film's strange intertwining of these ideas one of the key sites wherein it reasserts the very ideology it intends to subvert. Rather than reading this interest in "tired narratives about the crisis of masculinity"⁽⁵⁾ as being one of many theoretical interests which are involved in the formation of a broader revolutionary critique of late-capitalism, he perceives this fixation to be the film's real subject²⁰ and primary area of interest. Accordingly, he argues that *Fight Club*'s exploration of masculinity is not supplemental to or constitutive of other political analyses, but that it totally eclipses the film's other proclaimed reasons for being:

Fight Club is less interested in attacking the broader material relations of power and strategies of domination and exploitation

of the broader investigation of the relationship between contemporary consumerism and the alleged crisis of masculinity that *Stiffed* initiated.

²⁰ My fundamental divergence from Giroux's reading is that, whereas he considers the crisis of masculinity to be the film's real subject, for me its subject is ultimately *the real*.

associated with neoliberal capitalism than it is in rebelling against a consumerist culture that dissolves the bonds of male sociality and puts into place an enervating notion of male identity and agency....the film defines the violence of capitalism almost exclusively in terms of an attack on traditional (if not to say regressive) notions of masculinity, and in doing so reinscribes white²¹ heterosexuality within a dominant logic of stylized brutality and male bonding that appears to be predicated on the need to denigrate, and to wage war against, all that is feminine. In this instance, the crisis of capitalism is reduced to the crisis of masculinity, and the nature of the crisis lies less in the economic, political, and social conditions of capitalism itself than in the rise of a culture of consumption in which men are allegedly domesticated, rendered passive, soft, and emasculated. (5)

Although it is perhaps too easy to understand how critics could interpret *Fight Club's* representational politics as conveying "deeply conventional views of violence, gender relations, and masculinity," (6) I think the film's use of these categories is substantially more complex than critics such as Giroux have suggested. *Fight Club* certainly utilizes conventional notions about masculinity, but it does so in a defamiliarizing way in order to complicate them and reveal their problematic contradictions and relationship to broader discourses of power and ideology.

Obviously, Tyler Durden is the irresistible locus of these strategies, given the way he is situated by and within the film as a fantasy at once literal (as formulated by Jack, and so diegetically) and symbolic (as formulated by the viewer). Giroux includes an

²¹ Although I have tried at all times to engage Giroux in a dialectical way that is often missing from his reading of the film, his persistent desire to level charges of racism to the unacceptable political positions he ascribes to *Fight Club* is simply insupportable. As Giroux demonstrates, the argument can be made that the film is misogynistic, fascistic, capitalistic, consumerist, and Republican. However, the repeated attempts on his part to insinuate that *Fight Club's* politics implicitly contribute to the abhorrent treatment of people of colour is seriously misleading and needs to be proved if it is to be asserted. His attempts to make this spurious connection negatively (through the implication that the film erases people of colour from its cinematic pallet) evinces a selective reading of the

epigraph pertaining to the sweeping influence of consumerism which I will discuss further in this chapter but which for me highlights Tyler's presence in the film (as it also speaks to the film's recourse to violence). Citing Bill Reading's *The University in Ruins*, he notes that "Consumerism...is less of an ideological falsification of well-being than a mark that no benefit exterior to the system can be imagined" (12). Tyler's role in the film is precisely that of an imagining of *that which is exterior to the system*, that which is outside of late-capitalist discourse and therefore able to address it from a unique and subversive perspective. His fantasized presence and ultimate status as an absence at the film's centre suggests the degree to which *Fight Club* is highly ambivalent about the possibility of locating or speaking from an extra-discursive space. In many ways, this is the reason for the seemingly hypocritical or at least misguided casting of Brad Pitt. His sexual appeal and our knowledge of his magnificent celebrity is at once both troubling and necessary. At times, Tyler's passionate rants against consumer culture seem undermined by our uneasy awareness of Pitt's own hyper-complicity with what is arguably one of the more grotesque and self-evidently pathological manifestations of this culture, the popular obsession with the lifestyles of the rich and famous. Similarly, *Fight Club's* denunciation of the defining and homogenizing effect of our culture's obsession with images (and particularly images of masculinity) is made theoretically difficult to incorporate as a consequence of Pitt's involvement. If nothing else, the tension that this aspect of the film draws upon and invokes necessitates a much more active and involved set of interpretive strategies than is typically the case when reading cultural criticism.

film's actual content, since many members of both fight club and Project Mayhem are African-American.

Our desire for Brad Pitt and what he has been made to signify in the public consciousness is, to a certain extent, what these moments in *Fight Club* are (also) about. Amy Taubin notes that Fincher institutes this dynamic “by making Tyler so alluring and charismatic. Tyler is posed as an object of desire and of identification – Pitt...has never been as exquisite as he is with a broken nose and blood streaming down his cut body” (Taubin 3).²² This dis-ease is deployed in several specific instances that suggest a more complicated equation of consumerism and masculinity within the film as a whole than has generally been acknowledged. For instance, in one scene Jack and Tyler are waiting to catch a bus and are standing next to a Hugo Boss billboard that shows a beautiful young man standing in his underwear. Because neither of them notice or comment on this image, we assume it is an unfortunate instance of the kind of product placements²³ now omnipresent in Hollywood films.²⁴ However, our sense of disappointment at the presence of a commercial would probably not register as problematic in another film, if it

²² Giroux finds this recognition disappointing and observes that “Taubin, it seems, was also bowled over with Brad Pitt’s new-found masculinity” (Giroux 20). This derisive dismissal again suggests a disinterest in the way *Fight Club* was actually received as a cultural product.

²³ The unusually complex incorporation of product placement such as this in *Fight Club* shows the extent to which Rodriguez’s suggestion that they undermine its critical function is grossly simplified. In virtually every instance when a brand name appears, it is subject to a process which Kalle Lasn calls ‘abusting’ or ‘uncooling’ (See Lasn, *Culture Jam*) and is read (and denounced) precisely as being emblematic of a fetishized consumerism. So we see the beautiful vehicles at a luxury car showroom, which are then entirely covered in bird shit by Project Mayhem, who also destroy a famously branded coffee shop and blow up the display models of a well known computer company. Although the argument could be made that ‘any publicity is good publicity,’ the invariable linking of specific branded items to the capitalist excesses which *Fight Club* suggests make conventional life not worth living stretches this already tenuous position to the breaking point.

²⁴ See Naomi Klein’s *No Logo* for a more thorough discussion of how the relationship between mainstream American film and advertising has been madly inverted so that the latter is now routinely the only reason for the existence of the former, if in fact the two cultural categories can any longer be separated at all.

registered at all. The dis-ease exists because we have previously heard Tyler ironically suggest that men today no longer care about crime or poverty, but about a litany of consumer concerns, one of which is the presence of “some guy’s name on my underwear.” This resonates in a personal way to Jack who had previously detailed with absurd (yet familiar) pride his near perfect wardrobe of “CK shirts... DKNY shoes... AX ties.” These prior speeches obviously force us to frown upon the film’s complicity with an aspect of consumerism made apparent by the seemingly detached inclusion of the Hugo Boss commercial. However, this reading is once more thrown into relief when they get on the bus and are now face to face with an almost identical advertisement for the same brand of underwear. Jack looks at the smaller poster of what is perhaps the same beautiful young model,²⁵ draws Tyler’s attention to it and scornfully asks “Is that what a man looks like?” Tyler’s knowing grin signals his similar contempt for this brand of commercial(ized) masculine iconography, and he characteristically responds, “Self-improvement is masturbation. Now Self-destruction...” However, the spectacular and notably similar beauty of his own body (which is much on display throughout the film) must be reckoned into our analysis.

Ironically, the casting of Brad Pitt as Tyler which initially seems to undermine *Fight Club*’s critical engagement with conceptual categories such as masculinity and consumerism is simultaneously used to facilitate the film’s critique of the way these subjects are constructed in and through our culture. In a manner that surely echoes the diegetic splitting of Jack’s subjectivity (into Jack/Tyler), Tyler himself is further split

²⁵ It is difficult to tell if it is the same model or a different one for reasons that are at once obvious and important. This homogeneity of commercial beauty will be dissected more directly in my concluding discussion of Brett Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* and *Glamourama*, two novels that explicitly deal with this disturbing uniformity of imagery.

(into Tyler/Brad²⁶) and each coupling creates a tension within which the actions of the film's characters must be interpreted. Although Tyler splices single frames of pornography into family films, we know Brad could well provide one of the celebrity voices for such a film.²⁷ Although members of Project Mayhem randomly demagnetize tapes in a (barely disguised) Blockbuster video-store to fulfill one of Tyler's homework assignments, are we not aware that many of Brad's own cinematic manifestations could be erased in the process? Is this not one of the acknowledgements that is made by the film's repeated self-identification of itself—the inclusion of Tyler's "cigarette burns" on the screen; the image vibrating as if the film is shaking as it furiously unspools; Tyler's acknowledgement of Jack's "flashback humour"; the infamous 'subliminal' penis shot that is *Fight Club's* final frame—as a Hollywood film which will be shown in the kinds of places Tyler works? How else are we to interpret the *unheimlich* effect generated by Tyler's assertion that "we've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'll be millionaires and rock gods and movie stars, but we won't" other than as a foregrounded acknowledgement of Brad's and the film's complex involvement in the culture of which they speak? When Tyler and his fellow "service-industry guerillas" slyly taint the ornate gourmet meals enjoyed by the wealthy at the elegant Pressman hotel with their urine, mucous, and ejaculate, does it not trouble us that this is precisely the kind of restaurant where Brad himself might be eating? Are the luxury vehicles that Tyler's group defaces not exactly symbols of the very wealth and privilege we know Brad himself both enjoys and signifies? Might I even suggest that Brad himself (and his perfect bronze skin in

²⁶ Our attention is explicitly drawn to think in these terms (although given Pitt's level of success we already would) by the cheeky presence of a billboard in the background of one scene advertising his film *Seven Years in Tibet* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1997).

particular) would belong to the small but privileged target demographic of the twenty-dollars-a-bar variety of soap made by Tyler out of rendered human fat? The reason the model on the billboard advertising Hugo Boss underwear is a beautiful young man other than Brad Pitt is not because the filmmakers wanted to downplay his similarities to these symbols of consumerism. Adversely, this precious and knowing gesture is avoided because the connection is obvious to us all already, it is (correctly) assumed that this strange dynamic will necessarily inform a popular reading of the film.

Rather than taking flight from the viewer's identification of the film's critique with that which it purports to critique,²⁸ *Fight Club* revels in it and does so for a theoretically interesting reason which actually exceeds the critical scope of Palahniuk's novel. Despite Giroux's arguments to the contrary, this meta-commentary is nowhere more evident than in the film's comingling of conventional notions of consumerism and masculinity. Both Tyler as Jack's alter ego and Tyler as the character played by Brad are emblematic of dual expressions of consumerism and masculinity, albeit in opposing forms. Each not only occupies but also embodies a subject position that is the reverse of (but always implicit in) the other. What precariously unifies the two symbolic figures is the audience's recognition that they are a fantasy, created by Jack out of the very same ambiguous relationship to culture that the film inspires in the audience.

²⁷ And, indeed, he has. He provided the voice of Sinbad in the animated film *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas* (Patrick Gilmore/ Tim Johnson, 2003).

²⁸ As we know, *Fight Club* itself could very well be one of the videos that are arbitrarily erased by Tyler's video-store terrorists. In this regard, the dual set of values embodied by the two Tylers can be read as a way of reckoning with the film's own ambiguous position as a product of consumer culture which calls for the demolition of that culture. Ironically, then, the expensive casting of superstar Brad Pitt as Tyler can be understood as the best way to justify *Fight Club* the non-commercial/commercial film's embarrassingly (given its subversive aspirations) large budget.

Although Giroux acknowledges Tyler's spectrality, he insufficiently considers how the late-coming realization that Tyler is a projection of Jack transforms the apparent sadism of some scenes (such as the chemical burning of Jack's hand, and his early fights with Tyler) into a masochism which is much harder to account for.²⁹ However, Tyler's status as doppelganger is crucial to our understanding of the role he plays in advancing *Fight Club's* theoretical account of the operations of consumer culture. The irresolvable slipperiness of his character, his participation in competing discourses, acts as a recognition of the fact that, to resituate Giroux's citation of Readings, nothing "exterior to the [consumerist] system can be imagined" (12). Even in a film (and from a narrator) whose existence hinges upon the demonstrable invocation of a way of being outside of the ideology of late-capitalism, such a phantasm can only materialize in terms that are familiar to and in some ways a product of that system. Try as it might, *Fight Club* knows it cannot articulate the critique it needs to because if it could, then the conditions which made it necessary in the first place would no longer exist. Resistance to contemporary consumer culture, then, cannot be articulated in an entirely new ideological language

²⁹ Describing the burning of Jack's hand, Giroux argues "Tyler initiates Jack into the higher reaches of homoerotically charged sadism by kissing Jack's hand and then pouring corrosive lye on it, watching as the skin bubbles and curls... As grotesque as this act appears, Fincher does not engage it—or similar representations in the film—as an expression of pathology" (16). However, given Jack's realization that Tyler is a figment of his imagination and that Fincher signals this realization in part by explicitly flashing back to this scene to show Jack burning himself while alone at his kitchen table, I would suggest that if Fincher falters it is by *over*-pathologizing the gesture. It is pathologized initially as a sadomasochistic act, which is clear to any viewer capable of picking up cinematic cues (or, indeed, any viewer who thinks burning one's flesh with chemicals is an inherently insane act). It is then re-pathologized in the film's final act, only now as a (perhaps more perverse) purely masochistic enterprise. *Fight Club's* closure is similarly problematic to me not because it validates the actions which precede it but because it comes dangerously close to making all of Jack and Tyler's behavior pathological, and in doing so approaches a compromising of the revolutionary position it adopts throughout.

since on the one hand it is impossible, and on the other if it were possible then it would be incomprehensible.

Masculinity is articulated in a way that is shot through with a structurally identical paradox. On the one hand, Jack creates Tyler out of a need to (re)create himself anew, both as a man and as a consumer and particularly as a man who is *not* defined by his deep participation in consumer culture. On the other, since his only (possible) frame of reference is that afforded by consumer culture, he has no choice but to assemble Tyler out of elements taken from this framework. And so Tyler is a fantasy of the absolute other, but one constituted from within the limits of a consumerist imagination.³⁰ When the evidence becomes too great and Jack has no other option than to finally acknowledge that Tyler is his creation, Tyler explains the relationship between the two competing parts of Jack's psyche in a way that makes explicit the extent to which this is the case. He claims "all the ways you wish you could be: that's me. I look like you want to look, fuck like you want to fuck, I'm smart, capable, and, most importantly, I'm free in all the ways that you are not." As the psychological projection of a mind that the film shows to be more rigidly delineated and defined by the ethos of consumerism than any other characters (a difference that is quantitative, not qualitative), it is entirely necessary that Tyler possess the qualities of masculinity that Giroux dismisses as conventional. Their conventionality, far from being a weakness in the film, occupies a central role in *Fight Club's* critical function. Since (alas) viewers are forced to identify themselves with the downtrodden figure of Jack, we are at the same time required to consider what our desire to possess the

³⁰ It is vital to reassert here that this inability to think 'outside the box' of late-capitalism is in no way indicative of an imaginative deficit specifically on the part of Jack but is, rather, an attempt to draw attention to a more pervasive inability to ever conjure up that which lies beyond the shifting boundaries of hegemony.

characteristics of Tyler (in *particular* his masculinity, in all its strength, beauty, confidence, and dominance) says about who we are and who we want to be. Indeed, Brad Pitt was cast explicitly because of our identification with him as a recognizable object of these desires. In a *Sight and Sound* interview, Fincher candidly explains that “I also know, just from personal experience, that if I could choose to be someone else, it would be Brad Pitt” (Taubin 4). That Tyler’s masculinity is informed by, and defined in a way, that makes it both recognizable and useful to, consumer culture is not so much a weakness in the film as it is an attempt to critically highlight the impact of this cultural formation on the desires of those who are subject to it, be they Jack or the viewer.

However, although Tyler is a product (both literally and metaphorically) of this far-reaching set of values, it is at the same time disingenuous to suggest that the brand of consumerism/masculinity that he embodies automatically excludes the incorporation of the oppositional politics he also represents. Giroux argues that Tyler and Marla and their relationship are *entirely* traditional representations of conventional gender roles, which requires a backing away from some of the film’s more interesting moments. Just as Tyler’s form of “hyper-masculinity” is deployed in a more complex way than Giroux accounts for,³¹ so too is the gender of Marla, a figure of tremendous significance whose

³¹ We might look, for instance, to the *overt* eroticism of his relationship to Jack (and to the viewer) which is uncharacteristic of Hollywood cinema. Jack repeatedly discusses his relationship to Tyler in domestic terms, beginning with his repeated observation that “the saying that you always hurt the ones you love... well it works both ways.” He describes their home life as being very “Ossie and Harriet,” which is visually apparent in the way they interact, such as when Tyler offers himself for inspection before he goes to work and Jack adjusts his tie. Jack is later overwhelmed by jealousy when he suspects that Tyler is growing close to Angel Face, who he viciously beats. At the risk of reinscribing homophobic stereotypes, we could also consider in a similar vein Tyler’s incessant donning of a pink bathrobe and habit of bathing in front of Jack as not behavior that is typically coded masculine in mainstream film, let alone hyper-masculine. We might also look to his intriguing and complicated relationship to both production and consumption in

importance is often diminished in the existing criticism. Marla, who is as enigmatic to the viewer as Jack/Tyler is to her, is engaged by Giroux in the following terms as he attempts to refute the “remarkable statement[s]”(20) forwarded by many commentators on *Fight Club* that the film should be read as a “quasi-feminist tale”(Faludi 89):

From the first scene to the last, women are cast as the binary opposite of masculinity. Women are both the Other and a form of pathology. Jack begins his narrative by claiming that Marla is the cause of all his problems. Tyler consistently tells Jack that men have lost their manhood because they have been feminized; they are a generation raised by women. And the critical commentary on consumerism presented throughout the film is not really a serious critique of capitalism as much as it is a criticism of the feminization and domestication of men in a society driven by relations of buying and selling. Consumerism is criticized because it is womanish stuff. Moreover, the only primary female character, Marla, appears to exist both to make men unhappy and to serve their sexual needs. Marla has no identity outside of the needs of the warrior mentality, the chest-beating impulses of men who revel in patriarchy and enact all of the violence associated with such traditional, hyper-masculine stereotypes. (Giroux 18)

the conventional sense of those terms, a conventionality he is dichotomously positioned against. Giroux also inscribes the regressive form of masculinity he allegedly unproblematically embodies to the film as a whole, which is also a simplification. Although *Fight Club* does, I have argued, theoretically utilize traditional ideas about masculinity for critical reasons, it also explicitly challenges them. As Juhasz observes, the film is “decidedly feminist in the sense that [it is] aggressively self-conscious (and self-confident) about the mobility of gender” (Juhasz 211). See, for instance, the film’s persistent troubling of beauty myths, expressed in its character’s increasingly filthy and battered appearances or the demolition of Angel Face by Jack (“I wanted to destroy something beautiful”). See the many verbal critiques, such as Jack’s suggestion that going to fight club now gives people a *real* reason to cut their fingernails or go to the gym, or the making visible of patriarchal hierarchies through their repeated discussions of the absent father as a symbol of a god “who, quite possibly, hates you.”

The only other point at which Marla significantly enters Giroux's analysis is in his initial description of the events of the film, which is similarly reductive:

Jack eventually meets Marla (played by Helena Bonham-Carter), a disheveled, chain-smoking, slinky street urchin who also slums in the same group-therapy sessions as Jack. He views Marla as a tourist addicted only to the spectacle of the meetings. Marla reminds him of his own phoniness and so upsets him that his insomnia returns and his asylum is shattered. Jack can't find emotional release with another phony in the same session. In the voice-over, Jack claims that "if [he] had a tumor [he] would name it Marla." Once again, repressed white masculinity is thrown into crisis by the eruption of an ultra-conservative version of post-1960s femininity that signifies the antithesis of domestic security, comfort, and sexual passivity, offering only neurosis and blame in their place. We now begin to understand Jack's comment (which occurs at the beginning of the film after the gun is pulled from his mouth) that "Marla is at the root of it." (9)³²

Jack's comments, though, must be understood in terms of the actual role Marla plays in his life and in the film as a whole. Far from being a symbol of consumer culture, as the only principal female character would be in a film which associates consumerism and femininity, Marla signifies its opposite. The ways in which she embodies these positions must be factored in to any analysis of the film's occasional collusion of gender and consumption. Marla's subjectivity is not registered as consumerist but is insistently defined as adversarial to Jack's who is (at least initially) the film's dominant symbol of the worst excesses of capitalism. Marla, on the contrary, is (he/we eventually realize/s) at the root of Jack's problems only in the sense that she is the catalyst for the creation of

³² This is one of a number of mistakes Giroux makes about the film (see also his misidentification of Raymond as Indian, when he is in fact Korean). Although I have no interest in correcting these errors, the tremendous significance of this misquote makes it

Tyler³³ who is in turn responsible either for his downfall or his redemption, depending on how you choose to read the dying moments of the film. Discounting the flash-forward of the opening scene where Tyler holds Jack at gunpoint, the linear movement of *Fight Club* introduces us to Marla before it does Tyler. In fact, the significance of Jack's early and repeated narrative backtracking to the place where the story really begins occurs to direct our attention to Marla's centrality to all of the film's events. Although already unhappy with his consumption-based lifestyle, he has no model with which to articulate a form of resistance because, in part,³⁴ he can neither fully articulate his nebulous dissatisfaction nor envision an alternative. If Jack creates Tyler out of his own desires for transformation in a way that reflects how enmeshed he is conventional modes of thought, Marla is the place where his *revolutionary* form takes shape. This aspect of *Fight Club* has been overlooked, which is peculiar given its thematic importance and the numerous ways in which it is visible throughout the film.

necessary. Jack's actual line is "I realize that all of this, the gun, the bombs, the revolution, has got something to do with a girl named Marla Singer."

³³ In this respect, Tyler's already overloaded symbolizing function needs to be supplemented yet again, a third time. We now must not only think of Tyler as a projection of Jack's and our desires, or as a character played by Brad Pitt who appeals to a whole other set of our desires. To this reading, we must include the idea of Tyler as a replication of Marla, or at least the Marla that Jack feels can help him overcome his rampant and deadening consumerism. The film's consistent deployment of the notion of intersubjectivity raises serious questions about Giroux's linking of masculinity with individuality.

³⁴ It is of course also impossible for him to imagine how a life not organized around the conventional terms of our culture because an integral feature of our current hegemony is the rapaciousness with which it disguises its own status as one way of life among a theoretically infinite number of possibilities. Appearing as nature or simply 'life', the subject cannot be allowed opportunities to speculate about possible alternatives.

In Palahniuk's novel more than in the film,³⁵ it seems that the narrative twist at the end will not be that Jack and Tyler are the same person, but that Marla and Tyler are.³⁶ The reasons why such a reading is entirely tenable are present in the film, and it is in this admittedly strange way that *Fight Club* needs also to be thought of as a love story. The Jack-Marla-Tyler triad is less clearly articulated in the film, but nonetheless maintains the basic structural and thematic features of Palahniuk's text. As Jack explains in the novel:

I know all of this: the gun, the anarchy, the explosions is really about Marla Singer....
We have a sort of triangle thing going here. I want Tyler. Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants me.
I don't want Marla, and Tyler doesn't want me around, not anymore. This isn't about *love* as in *caring*. This is about *property* as in *ownership*.
Without Marla, Tyler would have nothing.
(Palahniuk 14)

The love triangle that the three characters form is one that is, as Jack suggests, about power and ownership as much as it is about love in the traditional sense.³⁷ Within the unusual logic that the film establishes, each are wholly and sometimes *literally* dependent on each other if they are to exist. The film emphasizes the centrality of this bizarre love triangle to its defamiliarization of subjectivity by the recurring use of the number three at key moments. Tyler's first countdown to a "theatre of mass destruction" begins at "Three minutes. Ground zero." Conversely, he ends Marla's countdown to parasuicidal "soul

³⁵ Although this possibility is teasingly hinted at in the film in the many instances where Jack sulkily complains that Marla and Tyler's annoying habit of never appearing in his field of view at the same time is reminiscent of his parent's dysfunctional marriage.

³⁶ Or, even, that all three are. A very compelling case could be made, in fact, that Palahniuk's Jack, Tyler, and Marla *are* simply different parts of the same personality. Countless moments in the text would support such a reading which, strangely, would have almost no bearing on either the overall effect of the novel or its theoretical meaning.

evacuation” by arriving when she gets to “three.” He makes Jack promise not to discuss him with Marla three times, and would-be “space monkeys” must wait for three days outside his home before they are admitted. Jack hopes to die on a business trip because insurance pays off triple in that case, and he hears a rumor that Tyler undergoes facial reconstruction surgery every three years. The use of this device in the novel is even more pervasive. Countless words and expressions and scenes are repeated three times, and almost every time a measurement (of time or space or any other quality) or number appears, it is invariably a three.³⁸ Considering the extent to which both Palahniuk and Fincher have made the triadic nature of the film’s principal relationship pivotal to their defamiliarizing of the concept of individual subjectivity, it has gone largely unexamined.

The relationship between Jack and Tyler has been discussed at length here and elsewhere, but the love interest that unites them has been unfortunately downplayed. In part, this may be a response to the fact that Marla’s significance is substantially less immediately apparent in a film that seems (and in some ways is) interested specifically in male problems. However, a reading which suggests that Marla is not emblematic of the feminized and feminizing consumerism that *Fight Club* flirts with but a direct and revolutionary challenge to a consumerism that is coded masculine suggests an entirely new (or, at least, supplemental) range of associations which collapses conventional interpretations of the film, both positive and negative. Yes, both Tyler and Jack are openly contemptuous of Marla, but this is less a reflection of misogyny on their parts or

³⁷ But it is about love, too, which Jack doesn’t (and could not) realize until he has been able to reconcile himself with the real relationship between Marla and Tyler.

³⁸ See Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (14,15,17,18,19,21,23,25,26,29,36,37,46,51,57,63,64,65,68,72,88,89,90,91,97,98,112,114,122,125,127,128,129,130,133,134,136,138,142,145,152,154,155,160,161,162,163,164,165,168,170,171,172,176,178,179,180,183,185,189,190,193,194,200,204).

the films than it is of anxiety at their own reluctance (in Jack's case) or *inability* (in Tyler's) to exist without her. Although for most of the film Jack tells us he hates Marla, he loves her and recognizes that he can not be, or be free, without her. Tyler is similarly disparaging, calling her "a silly coos" who is so (presumably sexually) dirty that "she needs a bath." However, his eventual desire to kill her because she "knows too much" is symptomatic of his burgeoning awareness that she was the model upon which he came into being and his fear that Jack will soon recognize this, thereby making Tyler surplus to psychic requirements and condemning him to subconscious nothingness.³⁹ In a very different sense than that suggested in Giroux's analysis, Marla is at the root of both Jack's and Tyler's problems. Even a cursory look at the way her character is presented in *Fight Club* suggests her complicity in the specific characteristics Jack imposes on Tyler as a fantasized projection of that which he and we would most like to be.

Defamiliarizing Consumption

"Get out of here, and do your little life, but remember that I'm watching you, Raymond Hessel, and I'd rather kill you than see you working a shit job for just enough money to buy cheese and watch television."

- Tyler Durden, *Fight Club*

³⁹ This hostile attitude accounts somewhat for Tyler's harsh declarations about womanhood in general. It is exclusively he, not Jack, who sometimes makes the connection between femininity and the crisis of masculinity. We might reconfigure his speeches in light of Marla's actual role in his construction so that the only masculinity in the film whose crisis is one caused by gender is Tyler's. Jack adopts no such stance and neither does the film, because the central crisis of Jack's life is not that he was "raised by women," but that he is addicted to a consumerism which no longer satisfies him.

The ways in which Marla is absolutely distinct from the consumerism that Giroux feels is coded feminine by the film exist at every level of her characterization. Most obviously, *she does not consume*, or at least not in anything approaching the same way as Jack, the (a)pathetic, archetypal, uber-consumer. Marla exists as a scavenger on the fringes of consumer culture and is only involved in production insofar as she helps Jack to *produce* Tyler. Otherwise (and unlike Tyler and Jack), she has no job that we are ever made aware of yet is entirely self-sufficient.⁴⁰ She survives by living in a slum and by engaging an impressively diverse array of non-consumerist strategies of existence. She attends the support groups where she meets Jack because “its cheaper than a movie and there’s free coffee.” She gets what little money she needs (for cigarettes, perhaps, or dildoes) by strolling into laundromats, removing people’s jeans and selling them to used-clothing stores. She eats for free because she collects multiple plates of food from meals-on-wheels that she claims she will distribute to shut-ins in her building, people who are in fact long dead. She has no health coverage and won’t pay to see a doctor so forces Jack to come over and give her a breast exam. The only time we see her in a traditional commercial setting (other than when stealing/selling jeans) is when she meets Jack in a restaurant, and only then because she knows he will pay. When the waiter (a fight club member) tells Jack that anything they order will be free, she pounces at the opportunity and demands a massive amount of food. Similarly, when Jack gives her a handful of money and tells her to get on a bus to safety, her primary concern is expressed when she says “I’m not paying this back. I consider it asshole tax.” Her only other commercial

⁴⁰ This self-sufficiency (among other things) is signaled in the memorable scene when she first meets Tyler, who notices a dildo on her nightstand. Anticipating his masculine dread, she quips “Don’t worry; it’s not a threat to you.” See Alexander Juhasz’s “The

interaction in the film is the bridesmaid's dress she shows to Jack that she bought at a thrift store for a dollar,⁴¹ and about which the embarrassingly brand conscious Jack replies contemptuously, "it was worth every penny."

Many of these aspects of her character not only anticipate the anti-consumerist stance⁴² which Tyler adopts/enacts, but also her ongoing association in the film with garbage, which is also systematically linked with Tyler.⁴³ Both live in squalor (Jack calls Tyler's house "a shithole", and he's right), and exclusively wear used clothes. Each survives on (and is defined as) "the byproducts of a consumerist lifestyle," by taking used objects and recycling them, albeit in a much changed form. Whereas Marla ekes out an existence by pilfering things that are meant for, are/were owned by someone else, Tyler steals excess human fat from the dumpster behind a liposuction clinic and renders it into soap. Like his feminine double, Tyler possesses a wily knowledge of a variety of ways to make household objects mean something opposite of that which was intended. He makes weapons out of everyday household products (fertilizer, orange juice, cat litter), she makes a weapon out of anti-depressants by using them to try to kill herself. Because of

Phallus Unfetishized" for a fuller exploration of this scene and of *Fight Club's* broader interest in all things phallic.

⁴¹ As with several other products in the film, the dress undergoes a process of commodity de-fetishization as a consequence of her speech about it's (fantasized) history as an object, and through the transformation of what it now means in its new context. Rather than magically locating the meaning of the garment as inherent within the object itself (as is the case with Jack's designer clothes), the dress is revealed as a floating signifier.

⁴² It could be argued that the fact that Marla's politics are expressed through her actions rather than in Tylerian speeches is one of the reasons why the first *two* rules of fight club are that "you do not talk about fight club." Although I will also suggest the perceived importance of placing a revolutionary politics outside of language, I do not think it is too great a leap in logic to propose Marla as the originator of this idea.

⁴³ One of the more memorable expressions of this particular connection is made in the novel by Jack's alarm at the fact that Tyler and Marla angrily refer to each other as "human butt wipe" while they are fucking. This directly parallels Tyler's repeated declarations that everyone and everything (including himself) is garbage.

his more substantial role in the middle part of the film, Tyler develops a range of associations to trash that exceeds those established by Marla so that they become an integral part of his ideological aspirations (to annihilate our culture and lay waste to late-capitalism) and political speeches (wherein he repeatedly exhorts the members of Project Mayhem to stop thinking of themselves as unique individuals and to identify themselves as made of the same rotting organic matter as everything else). Similarly, Marla thinks that “my tit’s going to rot off.” These notions are, however, ultimately little more than an intensification and expansion of the marginal position adopted by Marla which Jack unconsciously suspects may be the solution to all of his problems.

Both Marla and Tyler are also fiercely committed to the arguably odd idea that self-destruction rather than self-improvement is the only thing that can function as a corrective to our culture. In one of several similar speeches, Tyler exhorts Jack to “hit bottom” by arguing that “without pain, without sacrifice, we would have nothing.” The very fact that this point of view is both violently masochistic and individualistic calls into question many of the assumptions made by Giroux about the deployment of gender as a meaningful trope in the film, since he incorrectly designates these qualities as masculine. It is not by accident that Tyler meets (his maker) Marla as she is in the process of trying to kill herself. Nor is it coincidental that both characters intentionally and repeatedly place themselves in harm’s way. The most minor example of this, but still noteworthy in these health-conscious times, is the fact that both characters are chain smokers, which first separates them from Jack (who takes up smoking midway through the film) but which takes on greater visual significance at the film’s conclusion. Fincher peppers the film with shots of smoke curling disinterestedly from Marla’s lips, as if she is unaware it

is happening. An almost identical image is present near *Fight Club*'s conclusion when, after Jack has shot 'himself' in the head, smoke drifts out of Tyler's mouth in a way that forces us to consider larger connections between the couple. The pair's similarly self-destructive impulses, though, are manifested in more ominous ways. Jack tells us that "Marla's philosophy of life was that she could die at any moment. The tragedy, she said, was that she didn't." Not one to preach what she does not practice, her suicide attempt is supplemented by other flirtations with death, such as her highly amusing habit of strolling directly into speeding traffic every time she crosses the road. Obviously, again, Tyler's range of attacks against his self are broader and more diverse, but even he acknowledges this (influential) aspect of her character, heaping scorn on Jack as he burns his hand because he is not as brave as Marla, who he applauds for trying to realize the revolutionary potential of genuinely "trying to hit bottom."

Giroux's misinterpretation of the film's gender politics is unreflective of the way Marla is actually situated by and in *Fight Club*, not as the antithesis but, in fact, *the basis* for whatever brand of masculine subversion Tyler embodies. Tyler is Marla only *more so*, and this is an analogy that Fincher directs our attention to in various ways. It is not a meaningless coincidence that after he is made homeless he first calls Marla but is unable to speak when she answers, and so calls Tyler. Because Jack is not yet able to interact with somebody who so completely embodies difference—a difference that is, again, not defined by gender but by her less market-structured consciousness—he must first devise a psychic strategy with which to comprehend her anti-consumerist subjectivity and so calls/creates Tyler. When he is in the early stages of his relationship with Marla and his declarations about her are marked by fear and hostility (like those of a child, who reveals

his love by mocking and tugging the hair of the little object of his affections), Tyler is still unformed. Jack has not yet found a critical model with which to formulate Tyler, so he appears only as a phantasm in the film and in his life, a recurring ‘subliminal’ flash on the screen.⁴⁴ At this point, Jack’s dissatisfaction with his life has not yet been aligned with his deadening involvement in consumer culture, a link that Marla helps him to make through the anti-consumerist possibilities she represents. And so, together, they create Tyler. Although much more could be said about this interrelationship,⁴⁵ a few more examples from the film will suffice to demonstrate the importance of this realization to *Fight Club*’s overall theoretical project.

Giroux’s argument that the film is conservatively resolute in its endorsement of binary gender roles is considerably less persuasive when read in the context of the representation of the relationship between Tyler, Marla and Jack. Many of the qualities that Giroux codes as troublingly masculine about Tyler in fact emanate from Marla. She is also, *and first*, brash, self-assured and confident. She repeatedly displays a level of coolness that puts a genuinely alarmed Jack to shame. When he first confronts her about her disruptive presence at the meetings, she interrupts his well-rehearsed speech and undermines him by revealing that she had seen him preparing his lecture in his head in a previous support group. Later, he attempts to seem masterful in the used-clothing store (he has been confusedly following her around) by saying that this will be the last time they see each other, adding “let’s not make a big thing of it.” Instantly, she throws his

⁴⁴ These single-frame flashes of Tyler appear in the film as ghostly traces five times before his actual arrival in Jack’s life. On one particularly telling occasion, Marla and the Tyler who has not yet been imagined are directly aligned as his image flashes immediately next to hers on the screen, foreshadowing their eventual co-presence.

⁴⁵ For example, it is the acting out in an imaginative and performative manner the way subjectivity must always be formed, in relation to the other.

misguided assumptions about her feelings back in his face with the quip, “how’s this for not making a big thing,” which she says as she walks briskly away from him. Although, predictably, he follows her, the point is that, like Tyler, she is able to easily dominate him and has a quick wit and capacity for spectacular one-liners that leave Jack at a loss for words. The devastating impact Marla’s taunt has on Jack’s grasps at mastery is repeated almost exactly in the scene where he meets Tyler for the first time on a plane and attempts to impress him with his theory that the people we sit next to when flying are “single serving friends.” Since Tyler does not respond to this witticism, Jack begins to explain but Tyler interrupts and declares, “Oh I get it...it’s very clever.” Jack thanks him for the sarcastic compliment, and Tyler responds “How’s that working out for you, being clever? ... keep it up then,” and then walks away from a bemused and clearly deflated Jack. In much the same way that Tyler is persistently associated with subversive verbal pyrotechnics, Marla is wont to throw out such perversely alluring post-coital phrases as “I haven’t been fucked like that since grade school,”⁴⁶ which stop Jack dead in his tracks when Tyler jokingly tells him about it.

Indeed the aforementioned sex is presented in a way that particularly cements the relationship (now rather Oedipal, especially given Jack’s comparison of their behavior to his parents’) between the couple. Again using digital enhancements, Fincher frames the scene as a blur of bodies that cannot easily be separated. We cannot really tell where Tyler begins and Marla ends, and for the most part are unable to identify whose parts belong to who, which is a visual representation of the ways they are (not) delineated

⁴⁶ This is one of the instances where the film deviates memorably from the novel. Palahniuk’s original line is “Marla said she wanted to get pregnant. Marla said she wanted to have Tyler’s abortion,”(Palahniuk 59) which has a different kind of charm and contributes to a different set of meanings.

outside of the bedroom.⁴⁷ Given *Fight Club*'s ironic enthusiasm for all things phallic (condoms, dildos, huge penises flashing across the screen, the omnipresent threat of castration) we might also speculate about the likeliest reason why Tyler wears one yellow rubber glove while fucking (with) Marla. Could this strange apparel be read as a tongue-in-cheek allusion to the fact that he is really only fucking *himself*, masturbating? He and Marla are symbolically the same person, an expression of the same ideal; the glove is offering him the feeling that his hand is not his own, giving him the sensory illusion that two distinct people are involved. If this seems too spurious (or distasteful) an assertion to make, consensus can at least be reached about the applicability of Tyler's explanation of his spectral presence to Jack, who is the original template for Tyler. In ways that arguably exceed those embodied by Tyler (since Jack knows her first and chooses her rather than Tyler when the strange love triangle collapses in the return to reality that is the film's final shot), *Marla* acts like Jack wants to act, talks like he wants to talk, fucks like he wants to fuck, and is free in all the ways Jack is not.

***Fight Club*, Defamiliarized Resistance, and the "Good Terror"**

"Fidelity to the democratic consensus" means acceptance of the present liberal-parliamentary consensus, which precludes any serious questioning of the way this liberal-democratic order is complicit in the phenomena it officially condemns, and, of course, any serious attempt to imagine a *different* sociopolitical order. In short, it means: say and write whatever you like – on condition that you do not actually question or disturb the prevailing political consensus. Everything is allowed, solicited even, as a critical topic: the prospect of a global ecological catastrophe; violations of human rights; sexism, homophobia, anti-feminism; growing violence not

⁴⁷ A broader but similarly visualized defamiliarizing of individual subjectivity is, of course, present in the way the fight scenes are filmed, with bodies bleeding into one another.

only in faraway countries, but also in our own megalopolises; the gap between the First and the Third World, between rich and poor; the shattering impact of the digitalization of our daily lives....The problem is that all this occurs against a background of a fundamental *Denkverbot*: a prohibition on thinking....- the moment we show a minimal sign of engaging in political projects which aim seriously to challenge the existing order, the answer is immediately: “Benevolent as it is, this will invariably end in a new Gulag!”This is the Leninist position on which one cannot and should not concede: *today, actual freedom of thought means freedom to question the prevailing liberal-democratic “post-ideological” consensus – or it means nothing.*

- Slavoj Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates*

The most difficult thing about the thinking of evil [*la pensee du mal*] is to expurgate it of any notion of misfortune [*malheur*] and guilt.

- Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories II*

Any critical account of what *Fight Club* might mean (or do) must reckon with the violence at the film’s core. For Giroux and others, this is the unbearable problematic that makes “*Fight Club* a morally bankrupt and politically reactionary film” (17). Certainly, he acknowledges (although in a way I do not agree with) the extent to which it is a film *about* violence, indeed obsessed with it. Addressing Jack’s inability to prevent the destruction of the buildings in the final scene, he argues that this “message is entirely consistent with the cynical politics that inform the film: violence is the ultimate language, referent, and state of affairs through which to understand all human events, and there is no way of stopping it” (18). However, his interpretation of the film’s linking of violence and revolutionary struggle fails to consider the reasons *Fight Club* offers for so troublingly making this connection. It is also necessary to consider not only why but *how* this violence is deployed, since Giroux is correct in his assertion that cultural texts which

are preoccupied with the appeal of violence flirt ominously with performing a causal role in real world horrors. However, rather than try to justify this preoccupation by providing an explanation for the idealized and attractive brutality of *Fight Club*, I will suggest that the omnipresence of violence is perfectly necessary if the film is able to do the ideological work it attempts to do, if it is to embody the revolutionary political position it so forcefully articulates. Furthermore, the violence of the film can be used to illuminate the very different assumptions about the ways that resistance can be enacted which separate the subversive defamiliarizations I will discuss throughout this project from much contemporary cultural criticism.

Giroux's fundamental disagreement with *Fight Club* is that it seems only to be able to imagine forms of resistance which are expressed through various manifestations of violence. In this summation he is almost entirely correct,⁴⁸ and only errs when he takes this as a flaw within the film's epistemology rather than as a theoretical statement by the film about the historically-specific conditions of the culture of which it is a part. How then does violence function in *Fight Club*? In what ways is it articulated and to what ends? And, ultimately, why is this inherent excess required in the first place if the film is to work?

First, despite Giroux's suggestions to the contrary, the film's violence takes many (often contradictory) forms and ought not to be read uniformly. As such, it can not be viewed *en masse* but needs instead to be seen as a range of diverse practices each of which has different goals and effects. The overtly terroristic destruction of the finale is

⁴⁸ Although violence is central to most of the film's expressions of resistance, we have seen that hegemony is challenged in numerous other ways too (subversive consumption practices, non-conventional ways of being, dozens of forms of culture jamming, and so on).

clearly violence of a very different sort than the parking lot brawling which in some ways prefigures it. However, although in general the film's interest in violence might be described as escalating (or, as Tyler suggests about his subversions, as "evolving"), the narrative turn at its conclusion complicates all of the representations that precede it. Our (and Jack's) recognition that Tyler and he are one and the same person is accompanied by a series of flashbacks which require us to go back and rethink all of that which we have seen. So, although we have already begun to assimilate the meaning of some of the film's inaugural engagements with violence, everything becomes recast. This shift in perspective fundamentally changes any associations we may have developed about *Fight Club's* politics and it also constitutes a challenge to many of the claims made by Giroux about the specific ways in which violence is presented in the film. In light of the new developments, for instance, the agonizing scene where Tyler burns Jack's hand with lye can not *only* be understood as "affirming the natural 'fierceness' of men and providing them with a concrete experience that allows them to connect at some primal level." (16) Since we are explicitly shown this scene again and now Jack is, of course, burning his own hand, it cannot be read one-dimensionally, as an unequivocal act of "sadism," because it is (also) the opposite. Such an approach also fails to account for the ways in which this revelation changes the nature of the first fight club, since this scene *literally* cannot be read exclusively as reinscribing a male competition ideologically linked with capitalism since Jack is competing with no one (but himself). Violence in the film is necessarily dually characterized both as sadistic and masochistic in order to suggest its character's liminal status, both inside of and attempting to become external to hegemonic discourse.

That which *Fight Club* suggests must first be destroyed before it turns its attention to buildings is the part(s) of ones self which is defined by late-capitalist ideology. Tyler argues that “we need to reject the basic assumptions of civilization, especially the importance of material possessions,”⁴⁹ because “it’s only when we’ve lost everything that we’re not afraid to do anything.” What is required, as Tyler and Marla repeatedly suggest, is self-destruction, or at least the annihilation of the (for Jack quite substantial) part of the self that is necessarily produced by, and defined within the ideological parameters of, consumer culture. We have seen how Tyler is formulated in an attempt to accomplish this seemingly impossible shift in subjectivity (in order that Jack will become able to *get* both the girl and himself), to formulate an identity that is outside of discourse. However, although Tyler is the most obvious means with which to affect such a repositioning, the film uses a diversity of other tactics with which to forge a path to this strange end.

The very first shot of the film, for instance, should be read as inaugurating a cinematic pattern of revealing the degree to which the bodies and psyches of the late-capitalist subject have undergone a variation of the same process of commodification that is more typically connected to objects. As discussed previously, the camera pulls rapidly backwards through the nebula of Jack’s brain before travelling up the barrel of the gun in his mouth and leaving us in the position of Tyler, looking into Jack from between the pistol’s sights. Although in some respects this superficially suggests that the gun is a part of Jack, or at least is an unwelcome violation of the boundaries of his subjectivity, the link is clarified in the following scene. The movement this time is filmed in a way that is

⁴⁹ Given *Fight Club*’s relentless dismantling of the difference between subjects and material possession, this is a particularly meaningful and difficult gesture.

clearly reminiscent of the fantastic voyage of the opening shot. Just as we have been digitally whisked away from the centre of Jack (the symbolic site of his consumerist identity), we are now similarly hurtled down the side of the building that is about to explode and see (through a bullet hole in the window of a van) the bombs that are about to orchestrate this demolition.⁵⁰ Large sections of *Fight Club* are devoted to revealing the degree to which it is not only the headquarters of banks that reflect capitalist ideology, but individual agents as well. The aim here is not simply to present this theoretical position so as to convince the viewer that we are *all* products of/in a consumer culture⁵¹ that Jack in particular embodies, but to suggest that this is what the violence of the film is to be directed at. This is the object of *Fight Club*'s myriad attacks.

And so a subversive pattern of defamiliarization begins, wherein the subject is made inseparable from objects by challenging the boundaries that are typically assumed to divide them. This reimagining occurs in countless different ways (both literal and symbolic) and goes a long way toward explaining *Fight Club*'s controversial recourse to violence. Although the converging of bodies and objects is even more rigorously pursued in Palahniuk's novel, its presence is palpable in the film and is generally accomplished in

⁵⁰ One of the recurring ideas in *Fight Club* is that everyday objects (including, of course, individuals) contain within themselves the potential for their own destruction. This is most obviously expressed in the household products Tyler makes bombs from (fridges, computers, cat litter, orange juice, and so on), but it is also an attempt to suggest that the late-capitalist subject contains within himself the methods with which to destroy late-capitalist subjectivity and, indeed, that late-capitalism itself contains within it the seeds of its own demise.

⁵¹ Although this is clearly also one of the film's theoretical projects. As is the case in *American Psycho*, *Fight Club* is interested in exploring George Lukacs' notion that the "transformation of a human function into a commodity thus reveals in all its starkness the dehumanized and dehumanizing function of the commodity relation"(Lukacs 92).

two fairly clear ways: by showing the effect of things on bodies, and by showing the effect of bodies on things.⁵²

Other than its explicit theoretical function, the presence of what Giroux designates as “a gruesome and relentless spectacle of bare-knuckled brutality, blood-curdling, and stylized gore” (16)⁵³ affords many salient opportunities for bodies to spill over into things, and vice-versa. Therefore, in the first category we might consider such examples as *Fight Club*’s interest in penetrations such as those suggested by Marla’s dildo and the pills she takes (too many of); the gun in Jack’s mouth; the knives which threaten to enter the scrotums of Jack and the chief of police, as well as the breasts of Marla and Bob; the sinister presence of Tyler’s rubber glove and its unexplored involvement in the sex act; the bullets which enter the heads of Bob and, later, Jack/Tyler. Opposite instances of bodies entering things are even more pervasive: Jack throwing himself into his bosses shelves, glass table, the parking lot glass booth and van mirror; Jack repeatedly smashing Angel Face’s head into the concrete floor; Bob’s burial; Tyler leaking each of his various bodies fluids into food; the bag of human fat which rips on the fence and spills everywhere; the numerous occurrences of writing from the body (the ‘happy face’ imprints of Jack’s tears on Bob’s shirt and of his blood—not to mention everyone else’s—on the floor of *Fight Club*, the lip-shaped chemical burns on the hands of everyone in Project Mayhem); used condoms floating in Tyler’s toilet; Tyler’s

⁵² Obviously, the third expression of this pattern involves the film’s systematic challenging of the idea that subjects are meaningfully divided from one another within a homogenized consumer culture. However, this concern, although similarly enacted, has more to do with the film’s defamiliarizing stance with regard to capitalist subjectivity and its attendant ideas about autonomy than it has to do with explaining the need for violence as a/the form of resistance in the film.

explanation of the origins of soap wherein the burned bodies of warriors soak into the earth.

Many of the violations of corporeal limits are suggestive of both these processes, especially in the film's harnessing of the trope of recycling with which Tyler and Marla (the garbage of the film) are constantly associated. Bars of soap are made from the by-products of liposuction and are sold back, as Tyler meanly suggests, to the owners of the fat asses from whence they came. The bodies of those accident victims that Jack applies his elegantly cynical recall formula to are broken apart by the vehicles they are driving but also become melded into the incinerated cars themselves, as with the human fat which fuses to the now deceased owner's polyester shirt and the car's backseat. Tyler pisses, farts, sneezes, and comes into food which is then absorbed into the bodies of those who eat at the Pressman hotel. Although this is less apparent in the film than in the novel, this kind of self-sufficiency is an integral aspect of life in Project Mayhem, wherein Tyler's home becomes a closed circuit of production and consumption, feeding off itself in countless inventive ways.⁵⁴ In important respects, the disintegration of the boundaries between bodies and things is what makes the manner of resistance detailed in the film necessary. As the ultimate site upon which late-capitalist ideology is inscribed, the body and mind of the subject is the first space that will need to be rewritten if transformation is to take place, if we are to become "free to do anything." As Tyler explains, "Self-improvement is masturbation; Now self-destruction..."

⁵⁴ For instance, Jack is embarrassed by one of Marla's visits because of the human remains (not only hair procured from a barber's shop, but also teeth and bones) which are sprinkled throughout his garden, and which they use as fertilizer to help grow the food that sustains them.

It is in these terms that the idea of fight club is born. Although this is not the reading Giroux offers, fighting in the film is primarily marked not by an aggression to the other, but by a turning on the self. It is not about inflicting pain on someone else, but about the sensation of experiencing it for yourself. The brawling ought to be read in these terms, as an attempt to destroy that part of yourself that connects you to a civilization which defines you in ways you feel uneasy about, a kind of optimistic self-loathing that cannot be fully articulated from within the conventional parameters of that culture. Despite the initial strangeness of the idea of seemingly senseless masochism possessing revolutionary potential for the postmodern subject, the film ultimately demands that we consider the idea as simultaneously *inevitable*. In what other ways might such a first step be taken? As we will see time and time again in my discussion of these subversive defamiliarizations, the apparent impossibility of conventionally accomplished redemptive resistance is what makes such radically strange tactics necessary. Doing precisely that which seems least sane or culturally authorized (choosing heroin addiction, spassing) may perversely be the *only* way to redefine ones relationship to late-capitalist hegemony, to challenge its intrusion into our minds and bodies. It is in an attempt to address this subversive desire that *Fight Club* introduces its notorious premise as being in some ways also both unavoidable and necessary.

Once Tyler and Jack are fully entangled in fight club, Jack explains in a voice-over that the seemingly perverse idea was in fact, “right in everyone’s face. Tyler and I just made it visible. It was on the tip of everyone’s tongue. Tyler and I just gave it a name”.⁵⁵ If our current system of cultural dominance is one defined by its ability to

⁵⁵ Marla’s formative influence on fight club founder Tyler is further reinforced by a comment Jack previously made about her which is reminiscent of this passage: “Marla,

absorb all manner of dissent and critique while maintaining its fundamental ideological shape, if it is defined by its ultimate refusal of substantive transformation, how else can power be brought into question? *Fight Club* argues that if the ideological core of our culture can not be changed, and if we are inseparable from that culture, then the only way to revolt is to attempt to turn that kernel of oneself that may be external to discourse violently against all that which is imbedded in it. If culture cannot be changed, maybe all that remains is to change our relationship to it. It is the self that is the ultimate site of ideology, the film convincingly suggests, which must be ground zero for a resistance that seems always/already impossible, precisely because of this apparent impossibility.

“How much can you know about yourself if you’ve never been in a fight?”
***Fight Club* and the Limits of Resistance**

This was the goal of Project Mayhem, Tyler said, the complete and right away destruction of civilization.

- Jack, *Fight Club*

We cannot provide in advance an unambiguous criterion which will allow us to distinguish “false” violent outburst from the “miracle” of the authentic revolutionary breakthrough. The ambiguity is irreducible here, since the miracle can occur only through the repetition of previous failures. And this is also why violence is a necessary ingredient of a revolutionary political act. That is to say: what is the criterion of a political act proper?

- Slavoj Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates*

Failing to recognize what the film tells us about the strange manners of resistance that it presents, Giroux reads all of *Fight Club*’s many forms of violence as being an identical expression of masculinist/capitalist-inspired competition. Repeatedly, *Fight Club*

the little scratch on the roof of your mouth that would heal if only you’d stop tonguing it, but you can’t.”

discusses its peculiar interests, typically in the form of Jack's voice-overs, which provide a running commentary on the film's action. Jack describes the growing popularity of the clubs and characterizes their elusive appeal in terms which directly contradict Giroux's reading, explaining "Fight club wasn't about winning or losing. It wasn't about words." The film quite clearly outlines fight club's emphasis on masochism, rather than sadism. Most obviously, as the revelation of Tyler's real identity shows, they are borne out of the spectacle of Jack beating himself up in the parking lot, which is their ultimate source of attraction despite the eventual involvement of a second party in each fight (which in any case does not detract from their masochistic character).⁵⁶ This is the case with almost all of the film's violence: it is about getting beaten, not beating. Tyler gives the members a homework assignment, to get beaten up by a stranger, and is himself badly beaten by Lou, the mobster who owns the bar where they congregate to fight. Likewise, virtually all of Jack's beatings are given to himself, as is the case in his boss's office, as well as the parking lot of the bar and the underground parking lot of the bank offices.

Indeed, those rare instances in the film where the violence seems to approach the fully sadistic are pathologized. The most shockingly overt of these moments occurs when a jealous and dispirited Jack attempts to exact revenge on Angel Face, who he considers a rival for Tyler's affections. The two men select each other for a fight that *is* framed in Giroux's terms of masculine ferocity and competitiveness, but when Jack beats his foe's pretty face to a pulp he is wholly renounced by the other members who recognize that he

⁵⁶ This is foreshadowed by Jack's shrewdly tactical and comic self-beating in his boss's office which ultimately facilitates his greater involvement in subversive activities. Slavoj Žižek reads this scene in particular and the film's masochism in general as an enactment on Jack's part of the inherent violence of a capitalism that is embodied by his hapless boss, and is a destabilizing strategy because it renders the symbol of the oppressive force

has violated the principles of fight club (and *Fight Club*). The camera cuts way from slow motion shots of the grotesque pummeling to reveal the stunned faces of the crowd of shirtless men, clearly horrified and disturbed by what they are seeing and united by their disapproving silence. This starkly contrasts the typically jovial atmosphere of camaraderie that marks the end of a fight, where the two exhausted men help each other to their feet and joke about their respective performances. Tyler is visibly disgusted and, as a deformed Angel Face is whisked away to hospital, he calls Jack a “psycho” and demands an explanation, to which an embarrassed Jack responds that he “wanted to destroy something beautiful.”

For Giroux, all of the film’s violence is characterized in these terms. Directly contravening (and failing to account for) the film’s appraisal of its own content, he denounces the fighting as “dehumanizing” (my emphasis) and suggests that the pleasures it seems to offer participants has “less to do with justice, equality, and freedom than with modes of hyper-competition” (15). *Fight Club*, then, adopts the logic of that which it seems to despise. It is “complicitous with the very system of commodification it denounces since both rely on a notion of agency largely constructed within the immediacy of pleasure, the cult of hyper-competitiveness and the market-driven desire of winning and exercising power over others ” (15). This perspective is an extension of the specific reasons he offers with which to denounce fight club’s progenitor, who is:

emblematic of the very market forces he denounces. For Tyler, success is simply a matter of getting off one’s back and forging ahead; individual initiative and the sheer force of will magically cancel out institutional constraints, and critiques of the gravity of dominant relations of oppression are dismissed as either an act of bad faith or the unacceptable whine of

unnecessary in the first place. For further analysis of this “most excellent moment,” see Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates*, 250-263.

victimization. Tyler hates consumerism, but he values a “Just Do It” ideology appropriated from the marketing strategists of the Nike corporation and the ideology of the Reagan era⁵⁷. It is not surprising that in linking freedom to the dynamics of individual choice, *Fight Club* offers up a notion of politics in which oppression breeds contempt rather than compassion and social change is fueled by totalitarian visions rather than democratic struggles. (14)

Just as Marla is at the source of all Jack’s problems *in Fight Club*, Tyler is the source of all Giroux’s problems *with Fight Club*. The hyper-masculinist, hyper-competitive, and hyper-individualistic subjectivity he embodies is the reason the violent tactics he espouses are both irresponsible *and* ineffective. Giroux concludes from this logic that all that “changes in *Fight Club* is the context enabling men to assault each other, but the outside world remains the same, unaffected by the celebration of hyper-masculinity and violence that provides the only basis for social solidarity” (15).

However, the liberating potential of *Fight Club*’s violence must *also* be read, in light of this thoroughgoing dismissal, by considering the assumptions that authorize his rejection of the film’s violent revolutionary stance, specifically in reference to their connection with individuality.

I have suggested that the fight clubs are not about wanting to hurt someone else in a competitive way but about using violence as a (admittedly mysterious) tool with which to approach the real, to beat oneself out of discourse. Obviously, this could be read as a worrying stance. However, within the broader defamiliarizing of late-capitalist subjectivity which *Fight Club* presents, a dangerous and apparently insane method might be just what is required in order to, as Tyler, argues, “realign [your] perceptions.” The film shows (and is itself) an attempt to locate such a site beyond the symbolic order of

our culture. It is not out of a fear of being closed down that the first *two* rules of fight club are that “*you do not talk about fight club*” or that “the first rule of Project Mayhem is that you do not ask questions.” Rather, this emphasis exists to literally represent the group’s desire not to have what are intensely personal experiences absorbed into a language which is itself infused with ideology. As Jack tells us, “it’s not about words.” Although on the one hand Jack’s formative involvement with the clubs suggests (as does Bob’s later membership) that they are a surrogate for the support groups which are all about language and shared experience, they are also characterized in precisely the opposite terms. Since verbal interaction too easily lends itself to the adoption of a familiar cultural script⁵⁸ through which we revert to a recognizable social position, the communications involved in fight club are primarily between the parts of ones self. It facilitates a defamiliarized perspective. Jack tells us that “who you were in fight club was not who you were in the real world.” By virtue of this shift, he and Tyler “started seeing things differently. Everywhere we went we were sizing things up.” It is not productive in the conventional sense of the term, and seems at times to have a narcotic effect which helps make life more bearable: “when the fight was over, nothing was solved but nothing mattered,” so that “after fighting everything in your life got the volume turned down.” It is not something that can or should be debated, contextualized, compared, or dissected.

⁵⁷ To see the popularity of this type of reading, see my discussion of Claire Monk’s almost identical analysis of the political limits of *Trainspotting* in Chapter Three.

⁵⁸ This is not always the case, though. The evasion of this numbingly superficial way of interacting is actually what draws Marla and Jack to attend the group therapy meetings. They both agree that when people are close to death or experiencing intense pain, they are more likely to “really listen to you” rather than simply “waiting for their turn to speak.” The most startling and sympathetic example of this openness is the tragic figure of Chloe, who is near death. She takes the stage and complains that “all I want is to get laid for the last time,” and then badly transgresses etiquette by begging the men in the audience to help her, promising them pornography, lubricants, amyl nitrate, and so on.

Its extra-linguistic properties can also be tied back to the same cultural impulse articulated in the passage from Slavoj Žižek that began the last section. In a very real sense, ours is a culture marked by an acceptance of speech of any sort, including those that have subversive intent. As Žižek argues, hegemony solicits critical opposition precisely because it can easily withstand a deluge of attacks that take the form of words that are always framed within an established set of critical limits. Similarly, *Fight Club*'s theoretical position is that other, less conventional methods of resistance are now needed, and maybe discussion may actually be an impediment to—rather than the only way to achieve—a new kind of subjectivity.

Obviously, the particular qualities of brawling are useful in this regard. Although it is easy to unequivocally dismiss violence of any sort as inherently and always undesirable, the problems *Fight Club* suggests late-capitalist ideology poses are so insidious that it seemingly could be a step worth taking, despite the risks. At the beginning of the film, Jack is a virtual corpse, barely alive, a victim of consumption-induced insomnia. Countless works of cultural theory both popular and academic take as their starting point an almost apocalyptic view⁵⁹ of the current conditions of everyday

⁵⁹ One of the many ways in which *Fight Club* insinuates this *fin de millenium* sense of the approach of something unspeakable and *final* is through its repeated use of countdowns: the film begins and ends with the discovery that bombs are about to go off; Marla verbally counts down to her death after taking pills; Jack imagines a plane heading ever closer to destroying the plane he is in; he and Tyler sit in a car as we wait helplessly for it to crash; his final recognition about Tyler's real identity is presented as an inevitable countdown; all of which give the sense that, as he tells us, "this is your life, and it's ending one minute at a time." The novel uses this device even more recurrently, and to even greater effect. Almost every major narrative event Palahniuk describes is infused with a sense of foreboding through his use of countdowns (see pages 36, 144, 154, 179, 188, 203). This strategy is deployed with similar intent but *structurally* in Palahniuk's *Survivor*, in which the entire story we are reading is recorded on the flight recorder of an airplane we know will crash at the end of the book, whose page numbers run ominously backwards.

life. Indeed, Giroux's *own* introductory description of our current cultural landscape suggests that contemporary hegemony is in countless ways a genuine menace to those who have no choice but to live within its seemingly comfortable confines. While the seriousness of these accounts do not necessarily justify violent forms of resistance, their force and very preponderance surely suggest that such extreme forms should not be instinctively rejected either.

Violence occupies a curious role at this cultural moment, as indeed it always has. It is reviled and adored, seductive and repellent, often at the same time and to the same people. Despite its virtual omnipresence in mainstream film, when attached to ideas or otherwise taken seriously, as is the case with *Fight Club*, it is something that needs to be explained or justified.⁶⁰ If we find it necessary to account for the film's violent fixations, we ought to look in part to the process through which Tyler is materialized, not as an embodiment of pure resistance from some outside of ideology mysteriously available to Jack, who is so firmly rooted in it. The film is about the absence of this elusive extra-discursive space. If "the heroic few" (Giroux's term for those in the film who engage in various forms of resistance) are heroic, it is because they attempt to locate the part of themselves that recognizes the importance of the desire to find it by any means necessary.

⁶⁰ In this regard, on-screen violence is roughly equivalent to on-screen nudity. In pornography, as in the action film, its (omni)presence is taken for granted and need not be examined. The porno actor is expected to be represented in the crudest imaginable light, since this is her job. Different criteria apply to *real* actors, however: their nudity is, to quote Stuart Hall, 'matter out of place.' The *serious* actor must always and repeatedly justify their appearance in a sex scene or, rather, the film must do it for them by making sure that the nudity is 'central to the story/character'. Controversial subject matter needs only to be taken seriously when it is presented seriously. Chuck Palahniuk has argued (www.joblo.com 5) that it is the film's anti-consumerist message rather than its violence that generated so much controversy, and he is in some ways correct. The one offends only because of the presence of the other, which is complicated by the strange fact that the most subversively political moments in *Fight Club* are its fights.

Since, as Bill Readings properly notes, consumerism functions by ensuring that nothing fully “exterior to the system can be imagined,” (Readings, in Giroux 12) it should come as little surprise that even the most extreme methods of resistance would be expressed in a manner that is recognizable to us. The violence that permeates the film is, then, constructed (and from the same source, Jack’s fertile consumerist imagination) in the same way as Tyler, both a part of the ideology it is an attempt to subvert and apart from it too. The iconography and style are familiar (we have all seen a thousand fights, especially if we go to the movies), but it is a violence that is dislocated from its original meanings, inverted, and radically repositioned. It is a violence, a resistance, defamiliarized.

Furthermore, *Fight Club*’s use of violence as the principal arbiter of social change can be read in even simpler terms, terms that would perhaps resonate more forcefully with the popular viewer who may (stereo)typically be said to have a less total aversion to violence than the (stereo)typical left-leaning cultural critic. Regardless of how worrying this may be to some, to many, the economic inequities, structural violence, and collapsing range of non-mediated experiential options currently available in our culture may already have reached such an unbearable pitch that a call to arms does not seem at all unreasonable. In this light, we may want to ask not why *Fight Club* needs to advocate violent means of struggle, but why a greater range of theoretical analyses do not? Why should we discount our first response, which at least warrants our serious attention solely on the grounds of its primacy? Is our most visceral initial response to any thorough cataloging of the infinite oppressions, limitations, and injustices that define corporate-sponsored hegemony today not precisely to attack any symbol or structure which

supports this system in the most brutally direct way?⁶¹ If we rationally feel that such strategies are distasteful, unsophisticated or somehow inherently ‘wrong’ in ways that make them ineligible as methods of resistance (because they will not really change anything), does not an imperative exist to provide explicit alternatives to what would surely be at least the most personally satisfying option? The much-debated violence in *Fight Club* needs, I think, to be appraised in these terms, as minimally providing the public with at least one popular cultural instance of a gratifying fantasia of anti-capitalist violence; as providing (albeit fleetingly) an aggressive assault on those socio-economic structures which seem to be becoming visible in the minds of many as being at the root of a dissatisfaction that has always been on the tips of their tongues.

For a moment, let us treat the film as if it were reality. If we consider *Fight Club* in those terms, what precisely happens in the film that we would desperately not wish to happen in the world we all live in, that would truly be an unwelcome thing? What is called for here is not a scene by scene reckoning of the efficacy or subversive value of each diverse act of resistance, but a simpler look at what the film *actually* presents amid a critical background of genuine concern regarding the pedagogical function of its myriad violence(s). A man’s IKEA filled condominium is blown to bits, but no one is hurt. Later, men stand in the parking lot of a bar and beat each other to see what happens, although we later discover it is only one man beating himself (but to the same end). Bystanders find this appealing in ways they cannot properly articulate, so they join in. A man burns his friend’s hand with lye to see what happens, although we later discover it is only one man burning his own hand with lye (but to the same end). Likeminded men then form a group called Project Mayhem and begin to practice a creative array of forms of culture

⁶¹ Or is it just me?

jamming. They vandalize buildings, encourage birds to shit on BMWs, demagnetize tapes in a video rental store, encourage perfect strangers to beat them up, smash satellite dishes and car headlights, soil food at an expensive restaurant with their urine, mucous, ejaculate. They splice single frames of pornography into family films, deface billboards, blow up storefronts and corporate art, rewrite airline safety manuals more realistically, steal human fat and make soap out of it which only the wealthy can afford. While many of these events are unseemly or seem pointless (which may be its own kind of reward), none are genuinely terrible if one's position is outspokenly anti-consumerist. Although we would not like to have our property destroyed or eat food that someone has urinated in, surely we can recognize the appeal of such class-bound mischief.⁶² In an interview with *The Onion*, Palahniuk recounts the positive and sometimes worrying feedback he has received from members of the service industry who have found their frustrations addressed in *Fight Club*:

I was in London last summer, and a guy came up to me at the readings, beforehand, and he said, "I loved what you wrote [in *Fight Club*] about doing stuff to celebrities' food, because I work at a five-star restaurant, and we do stuff to celebrities' food all the time." That's no surprise to me, because all my friends have stories. And I go, "Who? Tell me somebody," and he says, "I can't, it's a five-star restaurant." I refused to sign the book unless he would tell me one person. And he gets really quiet, and then he says, "Margaret Thatcher has eaten my sperm." I was just stunned. It must have been the look on my face, but he got this little smile and goes, "At least five times." This is a story that—my God, you can make a whole room full of people put down their forks when you tell that story. (3)

Although from a detached and logical point of view we do not approve of this kind of thing, is it not at the same time quite delightful to us in ways that warrant

⁶² In the novel, Tyler recommends the job to Jack because it "will stoke your class

interrogation? Do we not derive a certain forbidden pleasure from knowing that those who embody the values we despise, who facilitate/signify many of the cultural realities that terribly influence so many are in some small ways themselves being abused by precisely those people who may well be victims of their greater, structural, socially-sanctioned abuse? In most of the film's subversive instances, no one is hurt who doesn't want to be, who doesn't profit from the transaction. Innocent people are unwillingly threatened, but in a way that the film suggests is not really a threat at all.⁶³ However, in its closing scene *Fight Club* at least appears to take a worrying misstep away from ultimately harmless antics by showing the wholesale destruction of corporate office towers. Virtually all commentators have argued (for various different reasons⁶⁴) that this is a step in the wrong direction, a most unwelcome addition to the film's critical strategy. It is with a discussion of this compelling moment that I conclude my analysis.

hatred." (Palahniuk 65)

⁶³ This qualification seems an overly cautious hedging of one's theoretical bets in some instances. *Fight Club* goes to great lengths to suggest that no innocent parties are really placed at risk. Tyler makes Raymond the convenience-store clerk promise to do something with his life under threat of death, but Jack subsequently reveals that the gun is not loaded. The chief of police who tries to initiate a crackdown on the fight clubs is threatened with a castration we know is only a threat. The film's explosive finale is qualified by our awareness that great pains have been taken to ensure that all the buildings have been totally evacuated so that no lives will be lost. The novel is less scrupulous in this strangely discordant regard for public safety, but performs a similar maneuver in its final moments by closing the narrative in a mental hospital where Jack is being held. Both versions are, I suspect, fearful of the effects of the behaviour they present, and try to challenge their hero's actions by ultimately allowing us to think that he must be a madman to do these things.

⁶⁴ The majority of commentators have adopted the stance which the film on one level seems to invite; that it is an act of madness, a good idea taken far too far by Tyler, who now is a problem that must be dealt with. It is, therefore, shorn from the previous actions entirely, read as the expression of an altogether different impulse. Following Bulent Diken and Carsten Bagge Laustsen's reading, Žižek also suggests that the events which lead up to the explosions are an unwelcome digression. They argue that while the early fights have subversive qualities, the formation of an orderly and hierarchical militia and

In light of the destruction of the World Trade Center and the other terrible events of 9/11, the exploding skyscrapers at the end of *Fight Club* have (not unsurprisingly) recently warranted special attention. Those critics who felt the film did a lot of good theoretical work (as well, obviously, as those who felt it did not, or did none) found this connection notable. Žižek, for instance, asks, “Is not *Fight Club* the film about the emergence of American terrorism? Is not the final scene – the modern glass buildings exploding as a result of terrorist attacks – strangely reminiscent of the WTC collapse?” (Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates* 257)

What the majority of the film’s critics share, as I have previously argued, is the feeling that *Fight Club*’s violence changes or escalates as the film progresses, it becomes about something else. Characteristically, the final scene is viewed as the ultimate expression of this deviation. This reading has a lot to recommend it, especially considering what the film seems to be saying about its own final expression of anti-capitalist resistance. It is an act of madness, pathologized as the action of a Tyler run-amok who is now no longer merely subversive but presented as insane and dangerous. Our hero Tyler becomes a villain, a threat to be hunted down and stopped. Even though we are made aware that no-one will be harmed in the explosions and that they will “not [be] killing anyone, we’re setting them free,” Jack’s many frantic attempts to prevent him(self) from destroying the banks’ headquarters⁶⁵ are depicted as eminently reasonable. With the viewer, he has come to his senses, fallen out from under Tyler’s seductive spell,

subsequent terrorisms involve a disappointing adaptation of the structure and logic of the culture they aim to subvert.

⁶⁵ His impossible aim is to erase his culture’s financial information, which he feels is a necessary first strike against the plague of consumerism. He wants to “erase the debt record [so] we all go back to zero” which he feels will take the world “one step closer to economic equilibrium.”

and now complains that “this is too much. I don’t want this.” His fantasized other must now be destroyed at all costs, and although Jack finally discovers how to accomplish this task (by shooting himself in the head, undoubtedly the film’s most risky example of self-destructive behavior), it comes too late. The buildings come crashing down.

However, although *Fight Club* seems to unequivocally endorse this reading of its own inflammatory content, the ultra-violent actions of the conclusion can also be read in other equally tenable terms and which suggest less of a recoiling from the natural extension of its own logic. Given the theoretical positions the film adopts throughout, the ending ought to be read as entirely congruous with that which precedes it. Although it is apparently a form of resistance that is expressed in a different way, it is also entirely consistent in motivation, desire, and formulation to even Jack’s first break with consumerism, his parking lot (self) beating. We see the buildings come crashing down after having been exposed to a variety of defamiliarizing strategies which problematize the reading that the film seems at first glance to invite us to apply to its own ending. Because, for instance, of *Fight Club*’s subversive insistence that we reconsider the distinctiveness of the late-capitalist subject (from other subjects, from objects, from ideology), Tyler’s destruction of skyscrapers is perhaps *also* an act which ought not to be condemned, or at least ought not to be considered as unlike any of his others.

If the final act is unique in the film, this is only a matter of scale, of form rather than content. The finale is foreshadowed by Tyler’s destruction of Jack’s condominium, which he mournfully acknowledges was not simply an expression of his personality, but in fact *was him*. He explains “that condo was my life, ok?...that was not just a bunch of stuff that got destroyed, it was me.” This accords perfectly with *Fight Club*’s habitual

dismantling of the idea that, in contemporary consumer culture, *the self and the body are products of ideology in exactly the same way as is anything and everything else*. What all these repositories of ideologies are also linked by is the fact that they must all be destroyed, and this is the organizing locus of every instance of the film's violence. Attacks against the self, against objects, against property, are ultimately indistinguishable because the ideological target is always the same.⁶⁶ The only difference between things or between people is one of degree. Jack is *more* representative of consumerist ideology than is Marla or Tyler. The headquarters of credit card companies are *more* representative of late-capitalist hegemony than is a condominium or a computer shop. The attempts both within fight club and by Project Mayhem to eradicate this ideology, though, is drawn from the same hatred of the effect of these structures, this ideology, on both ones culture and on ones self. In the strange defamiliarizing logic of *Fight Club*, blowing up massive buildings is punching yourself in the face, it is a politicized suicide.

For Giroux and many others, this is a dangerous and untenable theoretical stance. It is fascistic or anarchistic or terroristic, but is ultimately not a viable critical perspective or mode of resistance. The alternative politics of subversion forwarded by Giroux in his critique suggest the divide that separates his cultural theorizing from that espoused in *Fight Club*. He suggests that the film is against the kind of "articulated, democratic notions of political reform" (12) and "politics that connects to democratic movements" (12) which he would endorse. He argues that we need a form of resistance based rather on "critical consciousness, social critique, or democratic social relations" (15), on

⁶⁶ The novel again makes explicit the implicit logic of the film in this regard. Tyler's position is that "A law is a law...Driving too fast was the same as setting a fire was the same as planting a bomb was the same as shooting a man. A criminal is a criminal is a criminal." (Palahniuk 142)

“justice, equality, and freedom” (15). Although his essay is pointedly less explicit⁶⁷ about how such resistance would effect any change or, indeed, how it would actually be manifested, these are the solutions he offers as a curative to the dire state of our culture and they should not be dismissed.

The representations of violence as resistance in *Fight Club* “conclude where engaged political commentary should begin,” (6) and this may very well be the case. However, the argument of the film is that because of the specific manifestations of oppressive apparatus in our culture, “engaged political commentary” will at best accomplish nothing, and at worst is a part of the problem it ought to address. As Žižek suggests, today we must “talk as much as we can about the necessity of radical change, to make sure that nothing will really change!” (Žižek, *Revolution at the Gates* 172) Are attacks on the film such as that offered by Giroux not precisely inspired by a fundamental inability to even conceive of a genuinely different political perspective than his own, that of the real Other? Is it not ultimately the violent radicalism embodied by Tyler the anti-capitalist terrorist that Giroux cannot accept, that is the film’s *real* Other? In his discussion of the political limits of multiculturalism, Žižek elaborates:

The Other is tolerated with regard to customs which hurt no one – the moment we come up against some (for us) traumatic dimension, the tolerance is over. In short, tolerance is tolerance of the Other in so far as this Other is not an “intolerant fundamentalist” – which simply means: in so far as the Other is not the real Other. Tolerance is “zero tolerance” for the real Other.” (174)

⁶⁷ *Fight Club*, for instance, provides explicit and detailed directions explaining how to make explosives out of various household objects with which to blow up buildings and disturb the prevailing socio-economic order.

The *Denkverbot* or “prohibition of thinking” that Žižek believes operates in the background of liberal-democratic hegemony is embodied by Giroux as he discusses everything but that which is ultimately most important, most subversive about *Fight Club*’s theorizing of resistance. The film is precisely and entirely about why “engaged political commentary” no longer possesses subversive transformational value today. It is not interested in demanding democratic social reform or in such hazy abstractions as freedom or justice or equality because it takes as its theoretical starting point the perfectly reasonable assumption that such gestures are widely encouraged for the sole reason that they are perfectly useless. New approaches are needed.

As with the other subversive defamiliarizations I will shortly discuss, the more extreme manners of resistance in *Fight Club* approach what Žižek calls *acts*, but the film is also a meditation on the cultural conditions that necessitate such risky and bizarre behavior in the first place. The concept of the act is forwarded by Žižek in a characteristically disorderly fashion across several of his works⁶⁸ but a disorderliness which is here a consequence of the elusiveness of that which it attempts to address. It is an attempt by the subject to touch the real, to step outside of ideology and transform oneself in relation to culture. For Žižek, the “act proper is the only one which restructures the very symbolic co-ordinates of the agents situation: it is an intervention in the course of which the agents identity itself is radically changed” (Žižek, *On Belief* 85). In another discussion of this unavoidably slippery concept, he explains “what is the *act* if not the

⁶⁸ I am here indebted to Sarah Kay, whose *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* contains a cogent and thorough explication of this concept (152-156, 158-159). She points out that “What remains crucial to Žižek...is the capacity of the act, as a moment of rupture and absolute freedom, to reposition the subject relative to the symbolic” (Kay 158). She also catalogues the range of (typically self-destructive) acts described by Žižek, such as “suicide, terrorism, renunciation...love and militant politics” (158-159).

moment when the subject who is its bearer *suspends* the network of symbolic fictions which serve as a support to his daily life and confronts again the radical negativity on which they are founded” (Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom* 86). Elsewhere, he describes this fundamentally subversive maneuver as “a gesture which, by definition, touches the dimension of some impossible Real” (Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* 121). These acts, which he elsewhere provocatively refers to as the “good terror” (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* 153) because “there is something inherently terroristic in every authentic act,” (377) abound in *Fight Club* and also feature prominently in each of the subversive defamiliarizations I will be examining. Each contains and is an interrogation of the need to perform such an act, to reach an outside to discourse, to change one’s self and one’s culture by at least attempting to live in opposition to rather than comfortably within its ideological confines.

Fight Club is a failure, but not for the reasons Giroux suggests. It fails only because it takes as its central theoretical task a project it already knows is impossible: the exploration of the idea of a subjectivity outside of late-capitalist discourse. This is not an acknowledgement that the film subscribes to neoliberal cynicism in the ways Giroux suggests. Although *Fight Club* knows—and is indeed entirely about and predicated upon the fact that—it cannot do what it sets out to do, it explores and punches out at the parameters of contemporary consumer culture using fantasy, defamiliarizing our world through the exploration of Žižekian acts. The ways in which it does this are, by virtue of our strange cultural moment, necessarily radical and unfamiliar.

Chapter Three

Trainspotting and the Subversive Defamiliarization of Everyday Life

History has also been singularly unkind to Scotland's urban youth...the response of youth to the prospect of a future on the 'broo' was self abandonment and an immersion in a hedonistic, self-destructive underclass existence, cut off from all conventional moral discourses. Drug addiction has become the demonic and demonized reflection of a commodified, fetishized and irresponsible capitalist system.

- Ian Haywood, "Working Class Fiction"

It seems tae go beyond our personal junk circumstances; a brilliant metaphor for our times.

- Mark Renton, *Trainspotting*

The points of overlap between the flamboyant sensory assault that is *Trainspotting* and the carefully policed shabbiness of *The Idiots* (the subject of Chapter Four) may, at first glance, seem incidental. However, aesthetics aside (at least for now), I will suggest that these two subversive defamiliarizations are generated by the same restless counter-cultural energies and by a similar sense of outrage at the limited range of ('authentic') experiential possibilities available to the contemporary subject. Furthermore, each also offers a radical critique of hegemony that necessitates an attack on objects and practices not typically assumed to be political (for instance, luggage and good health in the former, sheds in the latter) precisely in order to show the extent to which they are constitutive parts of late-capitalist culture as it currently stands. These works also entail a curiously similar participation in a seemingly futile project: how to fashion a manner of resistance precisely as a response to the impossibility of resistance in our current hegemony. In each case, the manner of resistance and critique is strange, but in *Trainspotting* the stakes are

physically dangerous.¹ The differences between the films, however, differences present at every level of production and of reception, ought certainly not to be overlooked, since they speak volumes about the kinds of critique (and about the methods of articulating critique) that are permissible and indeed celebrated in our culture. I will consider the related strategies of *Trainspotting* and *The Idiots* together before examining the ways in which the former may constitute an artifact that is at once both more and less subversive than it initially appears to be. While the Dogme95 film always seemed destined for the fringes, *Trainspotting* attracted a measure of success that (understandably) for many was in and of itself proof of the film and novel's complicity with the maintenance of social order, an order which it seems to abhor.

The most immediate discrepancy between *The Idiots* and *Trainspotting* as cultural artifacts exists in the way the two films were received, in the responses they generated and the level of popular interest they garnered. As we shall see, Lars von Trier's film was a spectacular failure in this regard. Even for a film with self-evidently limited popular commercial appeal (not only as a consequence of its unconventional and undeniably offensive subject matter, but also in the more immediately commercial sense of its lack of

¹ This seems to be another feature shared by each of the subversive defamiliarizations I examine at some length over the course of this dissertation. While the spassing depicted in *The Idiots* is not immediately dangerous, the public's outrage at the group's antics suggests it can at times become so. The most obvious example of this is the slap in the face Karen receives from her husband when she returns home at the end of the film. Several other scenes feature a more hypothetical tension caused by the threat of impending violence, as is memorably the case when Stoffer leaves one of his spassers at a table full of bikers who, it is reasonably implied, would beat him senseless if his acting was revealed as such. The physical dangers found in *Fight Club*'s methods of resistance are too many and varied to repeat here, but are at least somewhat different from the menace of *Trainspotting* in that they seem more controlled by comparison. The threats to the body found in *Trainspotting* are particularly worrisome in that they seem to operate beyond individual control: if one needs to use heroin, the risk of overdose or HIV infection simply come with the territory, and punish indiscriminately.

stars or marketable genre, subtitles and so forth), it was an abysmal failure. There are, as its producer sagely noted, “very few lovers of that film”(Aalbaek, in Kelly 87). Although it would be splendidly convenient for my purposes to suggest that the public’s negative reaction to *The Idiots* stemmed from the rare and uncomfortable depth of subversion it attains, this is simply not the case.² The reality of contemporary film distribution only ensures that the negative reaction to *The Idiots* was small in numbers, not in degree. It did not have less of a cultural impact than other less critical and genuinely subversive (and therefore more easily assimilable) works because it cuts too close to the bone, necessitating a defensive recoil. The much less immediately theoretically useful fact of the matter is that it did not have much impact because virtually no one saw it. While it certainly seems safe to assume that if it had achieved greater exposure, then this disinterested and/or disgusted response would only have been more intense. We are ultimately denied this knowledge by the same opinion-makers who initially shape our preferences so as best to satisfy them. Regardless, in almost every imaginable way, *The Idiots* is an instance of exceedingly unpopular culture: it seems always meant to be a film admired by only a very few viewers of a certain sort and von Trier appears to have made no artistic concessions in order to alter this situation.

Spectacular Success: *Trainspotting* as a cultural event

In contrast, the cultural penetration of *Trainspotting* was as broad and sustained as that of *The Idiots* was non-existent. The film was a *bona fide* international phenomenon, one that far exceeded not only the amount of financial success thought possible for an

² I will later suggest that, at a systemic and structural level, such a reading may be more feasible than initially seems likely by comparison to more manageable counter-cultural

independent feature (and certainly for one about Scottish heroin addicts) but also which also somewhat expanded the very kinds of success that an independent film can attain. It is the staggering diversity of (previously unimagined) expressions of the film's success that make it such a truly remarkable cultural occurrence. Obviously, the movie *Trainspotting* was already in some senses a hit even before it was a film because of the massive and similarly unanticipated cult popularity of the Irvine Welsh novel upon which it is based. However, the film was able to both connect with and expand upon the audience established by its literary origin to become a genuine cultural event. Given the degree to which readers possess (not unjustly) a sense of ownership over beloved texts that they sometimes feel is betrayed in the translation to film, this is in itself no small accomplishment. One need only recall the comic attention recently paid to the 'authenticity' of the popular *Harry Potter* films³, wherein obsessive readers of the novels scrutinized every aspect of the production for 'errors' (in one memorable instance, involving heated debate about the location of a birthmark on the face of the actor who would be Harry), as an exemplary case of a broader feeling of audience entitlement with regard to film adaptations.

There is little doubt that *Trainspotting* was shrewdly adapted for the screen, but the two products tell somewhat different stories in somewhat different ways. Although I will be discussing both versions here, and will spend a little time suggesting what the changes involved in the transformation might mean,⁴ my eventual focus will be on the

visions such as the enormously popular *American Beauty*.

³ *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Chris Columbus, 2001) and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (Chris Columbus, 2002).

⁴ For a more sustained and thorough examination of the changes made to Welsh's novel by screenwriter John Hodge and Danny Boyle, see Bert Cardullo's "Fiction into Film, or Bringing Welsh to a Boyle", Chapter 4 of Robert A. Morace's "Irvine Welsh's

film. The reason for this is simply because it seems that, although Welsh's novel may appear on the surface to be more substantially and explicitly politically engaged, the filmmakers have created in some respects a more ingenious and embedded critique. Further, given the extent to which *Trainspotting* is largely defined in the public consciousness in both its incarnations, it seems remiss to only consider one aspect of the phenomenon. By drawing out some of the more submerged but effective strategies used by the novelist to attain his overall subversive effect, and by making little attempt to present any kind of superficially similar adaptation, screenwriter John Hodge and director Danny Boyle have created a film that is ideologically faithful to its source text while offering a more comprehensive cultural critique—both in spite of *and* because of its glossier surfaces. It is perhaps the ultimate tribute to Hodge and Boyle that the experience of reading *Trainspotting* is far richer after having seen the film: it helps make some of Welsh's more submerged themes and strategies come more sharply and potently into focus.

However, *Trainspotting*'s novelistic origins only account for a small portion of its eventual popularity. A crossover art-house hit in the conventional sense of attaining and maintaining a wide general release, *Trainspotting*'s appeal also stole over into non-cinematic territory and became something of a merchandizing cottage industry and a marketer's unlikeliest dream. *Trainspotting* the novel became *Trainspotting* the film, a play, two best-selling soundtrack CDs, generated a new minimalist marketing aesthetic and countless posters, t-shirts, sunglasses, lighters and various other tangentially related collectibles. Stranger still is the fact that this flurry of commerce surrounded a story that

Trainspotting: A Reader's Guide", and Derek Paget's "Speaking Out: The Transformations of *Trainspotting*."

was not only firmly located in a specific time and place but one which was also articulated in a Scottish accent so thick that American readers required a glossary in order to read the book, and subtitles in order to understand the dialogue in the film. However, although the mania surrounding *Trainspotting* was most intense in Britain, it proved itself to be readily transportable as film, novel and wider set of cultural products: in an era of accelerated globalization and cultural imperialism, its appeal was as fluid as capital. For a story whose effect is in large part predicated on its very specific milieu, *Trainspotting* became international with seeming effortlessness. Its influence was as enduring as it was broad. Its distinctive visual style (a style pieced together from countless films, commercials and music videos and now referenced repeatedly in these forms) and irreverent attitude has been the subject of countless attempted plagiarisms. As well as making a star of Ewan McGregor (and to a lesser extent Ewen Bremner and Robert Carlyle), *Trainspotting* has also spawned a burgeoning subgenre of films which try to co-opt its distinctive aesthetic and energy, albeit with little of its subversive value, such as *The Acid House* (Paul McGuigan, 1998), *Human Traffic* (Justin Kerrigan, 1999), *Twin Town* (Kevin Allen, 1997), and Guy Ritchie's very popular *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998) and *Snatch* (2000). Each of these films superficially resembles *Trainspotting*'s memorable visuals and focus on various forms of bad behavior but none of them were able (or even tried) to duplicate the original's richness or satirical edge.

More impressive still is the range of critical responses directed both at the novel and film, although it became increasingly difficult to meaningfully distinguish one from the other for the purposes of analysis as an 'event'. *Trainspotting* occurred simultaneously in various disparate areas of popular culture, including music, fashion,

literature, design and film. As a supplement to the standard host of reviews, the entirely unexpected or, at least, massively underestimated popularity of *Trainspotting* (in conjunction with the suspicion voiced by many conservative commentators that it dangerously glamorizes heroin addiction) placed it at the centre of incredible amounts of heated debate in an impressive variety of international publications and public forums. *Trainspotting* is also an instance of that rarest of cultural products, one whose appeal is apparently not easily connected to a particular demographic group. Generally, its popularity was fueled by the interest paid to it by two sets of people who typically have very little in common and certainly not with respect to their taste in culture. It was enjoyed and debated both by young club goers (not typically interested in literary fiction or adaptations thereof), and by an older, more cerebral audience (not traditionally associated with the enjoyment of loud, raucous, and occasionally hugely distasteful cinema). Straddling with improbable ease seemingly all of the demographic hurdles which are assumed to separate (and define) our cultural tastes, *Trainspotting* not only had something for everyone, it also had something for everyone to discuss.

Because of the peculiar inclusiveness of its appeal, it was simultaneously and endlessly discussed as a possible Booker prize and Oscar candidate in literary supplements and entertainment sections. It was viewed as both a product of, and a contributor to, various emerging trends in Britain at that time, from the dawn of the idea of the 'new lad'⁵ to Tony Blair's rebranding of Britain as 'Cool Britannia' and the

⁵ This broad cultural resurgence "came to prominence in the early 1990s, marking a reassertion of traditional male values and prerogatives, following their abeyance in the 1980s (the decade of the sensitive 'New Man') and indeed in the wake of modern feminism as a whole" (Smith 11). For a more sustained discussion of *Trainspotting's* involvement in this strange phenomenon, see *BFI Modern Classics: 'Trainspotting'* by

attendant cultural explosion across the arts which accompanied these shifts. Academic journals praised Welsh's linguistic and Boyle's cinematic invention, while the movie was celebrated for its pervasive influence on youth style and culture in such resolutely low-brow magazines as *Loaded*, *FHM* and *Maxim*. As a cultural artifact, it seemed to have something for everyone, and lent itself to a boundless variety of detailed analyses. Incredibly, on top of the thousands of articles of which it was ostensibly the subject, it is already the subject of three book-length critical studies as both a film and a novel by major publishers.⁶ Because of the sheer range of debates into which it contributes or can easily be dragged, *Trainspotting* was a cultural product that generated countless other cultural products. Much has been made (and rightly) about the extent to which *Trainspotting* ultimately contributed to, at least as much as it critiqued, the consumerist culture it seems to abhor, largely because of the breadth of its commercial appeal. And the argument can easily be made that the coolness and seeming originality of the product itself helped feed a culture industry ravenous for novelty, particularly novelty with counter-cultural credibility. Ultimately, however, such an approach to either the film or the novel is reductive and has deflected energies and resources better spent on potentially more rewarding analyses. However, the widespread popular fascination with *Trainspotting* must at least be reckoned with if the public acceptance of its strange and often troubling vision is meaningful in any way, which is certainly the case.⁷

Murray Smith (11-13), *The Ultimate Film Guides: 'Trainspotting'* by Martin Stollery (59-62), and particularly Claire Monk's "Men in the 90s".

⁶ I am referring here to Irvine Welsh's *'Trainspotting': A Reader's Guide* by Robert Morace, *BFI Modern Classics: 'Trainspotting'* by Murray Smith, and *The Ultimate Film Guides: 'Trainspotting'* by Martin Stollery.

⁷ Welsh's novel contains signs of anticipating and deflecting this critique (that *Trainspotting* participates in some kind commercially viable yet grimy junkie chic which undermines its explicit critique of capitalist consumerism). When trying to trick Diane's

An Uneasy Fit: *Trainspotting* and 1990s British Film

What is particularly curious about the broad dispersal of popularity garnered by *Trainspotting* is that although the film certainly contains conventionally appealing elements, it is an original and raw enough production that its general likeability is difficult to account for. Films chronicling junkie life tend to be poorly received as a rule, and *Trainspotting* (with its hallucinations of dead babies, swan dives into filthy toilets, and piss and shit-storms raining down upon a family at the breakfast table) seems to possess more than enough objectionable content to scare away an audience. Because of its strange realism, skid-row locales, and attendant 'rough' characters, it is replete with violence, sex, drug abuse, and a pervasive atmosphere of nastiness and degeneracy. Although often darkly hilarious, it is certainly a serious film that contains serious events (the death of Dawn's baby, friends overdosing or contracting HIV, lives ruined). The film was criticized by some admirers of the book, because of a perceived sanitization

parents into believing he is respectable, Renton claims he is "a curator at the museums section of the District Council's Recreation Department"(146) and that his job is to "rake around in people's rubbish for things that've been discarded, and present them as authentic historical artefacts ay working people's everyday lives"(146-147). This description marks a knowing recognition on the part of Welsh that he would be accused of participating in the kind of countercultural pandering articulated by *New York Times Magazine* chief book reviewer Michiko Kakutani, who considered Welsh's "nasty first novel" to be [along with Larry Clark's film *Kids* (Larry Clark, 1995) and the musical *Rent*] "the latest offerings from a thriving brand of tourism that offers bourgeois audiences a voyeuristic peep at an alien subculture and lets them go home feeling smug and with it" (Kakutani 16).

of some of its less palatable elements. Critics noted that, although disturbing in places and maintaining some of the gruesome imagery of the novel, the film downplays many of the politically incorrect attitudes of its characters by omitting some of the offensive tirades directed (primarily but not exclusively by Begbie and Sick Boy) at women, homosexuals, and most other marginalized groups.⁸ While this is somewhat true, and certainly raises compelling questions about the extent to which the film articulates a cultural critique exclusively interested in examining class-based oppression (and in doing so overlooks what Welsh has to say about other expressions of subjugation such as race, gender, and sexuality), *Trainspotting* is no easy ride for the sensitive viewer. It is not in possession of the light touch and whimsical tone that has marked other recent successful British exports, such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1994), *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997) or *Notting Hill* (Roger Michell, 1999). It has even less in common with the enduringly popular heritage films ('Merchant-Ivory' style pastoral adaptations of canonical texts by Austen, Forster, James and the like), with which the British film industry has recently become unfortunately attached in the public imagination.⁹

⁸ Given his public endorsements of the film and the approval implied by his cameo appearance in it (as drug dealer Mikey Forrester), it is somewhat ironic that Welsh had previously criticized celebrated Scottish writer James Kelman for precisely this dubiously motivated censorship. Despite the frequent comparison with Kelman because of his similarly raw dialogue, Welsh argues that "The problem I have with Kelman is that he seems ideologically to censor his characters. They are always non-sexist and non-racist. But I don't feel you can put those parameters on the characters you've created. If they seem xenophobic or bigoted you have to let them speak that way" (Smith, in Morace 27).

⁹ For an amusing and insightful discussion about the differences between 'Jane Austen fans' and 'Trainspotters', see Derek Paget's "Speaking Out: The Transformations of *Trainspotting*."

Trainspotting also looks out of place among other films of roughly the same genre, which highlights the extent to which it is difficult to locate it in any one recognizable cinematic tradition or genre. While it is clearly too coarse to be considered alongside the sorts of genteel and droll fare mentioned above, it at least seems too visually playful (and therefore presumably apolitical) to fit into the other recurrent strain in recent British film: the gritty and despairing slice of life drama. The characteristics of this subgenre are best expressed in the socialist melodramas of Ken Loach [*My Name is Joe* (1998), *Raining Stones* (1993), *Riff-Raff* (1990)] and Mike Leigh [*All or Nothing* (2002), *Naked* (1993)], but it also includes such recent international releases as *Nil by Mouth* (Gary Oldman, 1997), *The War Zone* (Tim Roth, 1999) and *Ratcatcher* (Lynne Ramsay, 1999). These films focus with depressingly unflinching realism on the plight of the urban poor in a contemporary Britain blighted by the policies of Margaret Thatcher and dwell heavily on issues of gender, racial and class divisions, and abuses of every imaginable flavour (sexual, spousal, alcohol, drug, child and so forth). Because of the standard venue of these productions (barren inner cities), their ‘political’ tone, and the underclass characters they tend to contain, *Trainspotting* is in some respects thematically similar to them. However, the aesthetic differences are vast¹⁰, as is the film’s overall mood, which even in its darkest moments is infused with an anarchic energy totally absent from the necessarily despairing and oppressive works mentioned above.

¹⁰ Virtually every reviewer of the film noted the compelling disparity between its bleak content and MTV style. In *Film Comment*, Harlan Kennedy noted that *Trainspotting* contains “a gleeful repertoire of frozen frames, card-shuffling montage sequences, queasy false perspectives, and fantastical visual punctuation” (Kennedy 34). For the most thorough technical analysis of the film’s influential aesthetic (and its difference from the tradition of British realist cinema), see Stollery (34-48).

Although it is obviously reductive to consider a disparate group of films in this way, the films of Loach, Leigh and company tend to possess a persistent weighty seriousness in their approach to their material and enact their socioeconomic critiques primarily using the naturalistic tools of dirty realism in every area of production. While there is no questioning the importance and value of works of this kind, they tend to be characterized by a steady and predictable tonal descent from bad to worse that is seldom substantially interrupted by humor or cinematic diversions of any kind.

Obviously, *Trainspotting* marks a departure from this formula by treating its material with what at times seems like a too playful or ironic aesthetic flare, which many read as denoting a callous lack of seriousness and absence of compassion for those living in the circumstances it so memorably presents. While the music video style of the film is somewhat problematic, Boyle's direction is less motivated by cynical commercialism than it is by a too rare recognition of the fundamentally different languages spoken by films and novels and the potentials for critique that each offer. Although the critique it articulates is every bit as pointed and effective as that of more overtly political works, its raucous style and surface nihilism seem to have prevented its shrewd critical function from receiving the analysis it deserves. *Trainspotting's* political agenda may be framed in a way that does not look like politics as we know it, but this is more a function of the sprawling and elusive nature of the late-capitalist hegemonic system it is responding to than it is a deficiency in the manner of critique itself.

The content of the film is clearly not the secret to its remarkable success. Certainly, audiences do not typically respond well to films detailing the glorious highs and monstrous lows of drug addiction and what seems beyond question is that the witty

and energetic treatment of this material and the intriguing cast of central characters is at least somewhat responsible for the film's appeal. The narrative is relatively straightforward and is certainly clearer than the more digressive and meandering structure of the novel, which is loosely divided into forty-three sections (each of which is subdivided into seven parts) and is told by multiple narrators. In contrast to the novel's scattered style and seeming lack of a structural centre or narrative focus, the film is far tighter in its perspective, both narrowing the range of characters and locating the authorial voice almost entirely in the hands of one character.

Trainspotting is the story of a young heroin addict, Mark Renton (also known as Rents or Rent Boy) and the small group of friends with whom he grew up in Edinburgh. The gang also includes Spud, a simple and good-natured but nonetheless entirely hopeless addict, about whom a characteristically incisive Renton affectionately notes, "Even in his Ma's womb, you would have had to define Spud less as a foetus, more as a set of dormant drug and personality problems" (328). Also central is Simon 'Sick Boy' Williams, an amoral and self-obsessed womanizer (and occasional pimp) whose use of heroin is more spitefully offhand than Spud's or Renton's. Although a drug user, Simon's relationship to it is largely casual and his cavalier attitude toward heroin and seeming immunity to addiction is the source of limitless frustration for those of his friends who are less able to exercise control over their habits. If it is possible to be a social user of heroin (in the same way that one can be a 'social smoker'), then Sick Boy is one. Another character, Tommy, comes to heroin late in the story as a result of a traumatic breakup with his girlfriend, a breakup in no small part caused by Renton's careless treatment of a videotape of the couple having sex. Fleshing out the group is the memorably horrifying

Begbie, who strongly disapproves of heroin use but possesses an alarming alcohol-fueled addiction to senseless and escalating acts of violence. Less pivotal is Dianne, a schoolgirl with whom Renton inadvertently commits statutory rape¹¹ while off heroin but in the grips of a drunken libidinous state. Her centrality in the film's marketing campaign (she is 'Trainspotter #2' on the collectible posters) is rather misleading and seems to have a good deal more to do with the commercial value of her sex appeal than it does to do with her actual role in the film.¹² However, she does have a role to play and, along with the other trainspotters, is well drawn and appealing in ways that seem largely responsible for audience's acceptance of the film's less conventionally attractive material.

The cast of characters in the original novel is broader, containing several central figures and temporary narrators made peripheral or non-existent in the film. While this alteration is, as we shall see, both practically necessary and ideologically desirable, it does strip the film of some of the novel's richness. It is also significantly less focused around Renton from a narrative point of view. Although he is also the central character in the novel, he is only one out of several narrators, which places him in a significantly less privileged position than he enjoys in the film adaptation. It is also worth mentioning that the novel is at least somewhat less phallogentric in its distribution of narrative power, as it is recounted in part by Kelly, a character entirely missing from the film which is, in some important ways, a resolutely masculinist affair. Her omission, along with those of

¹¹ I obviously do not wish to imply the existence of some form of "accidental rape," only to acknowledge that Renton is unaware Diane is a minor when he has sex with her.

¹² As Murray Smith observes, "In the promotional material for the film, Diane is in effect made a member of the gang, displacing Tommy, by occupying one of the five portrait slots, alongside Renton, Begbie, Sick Boy and Spud. However, additional scenes involving Diane were cut during editing. Ironically, then, while the actual film narrowed its focus around the male fraternity, the marketing of the film promoted the idea that

other female characters who occupy more pivotal roles in the novel (Renton's sister in law, for instance, and Begbie's similarly ill-treated wife) do strip the film of an important focus on gendered oppression, which in the novel is firmly aligned with the broader operations of late-capitalism and its unequal division of social power. Although an unfortunate and arguably unnecessary reduction, this shift in focus seems somewhat motivated by a desire to make one element of Welsh's critique come more sharply and cleanly into view. As we will see, although the film seems at times less overtly and consistently politically engaged than the text which serves as its inspiration, it is in other ways a success because of the streamlined and elegant way in which it makes its critique.

The film follows Renton as he tries repeatedly (typically at the behest of others) to overcome his addiction to heroin and the life of petty crime and sub-cultural insularity that accompanies it. However, despite the seemingly bleak subject matter and council-estate *milieu*, a significant degree of the appeal of *Trainspotting* is derived from its energizing and hyperkinetic aesthetic style. As a cinematic experience, *Trainspotting* has more in common with the jarring editing and surreal visual landscape of the music video than it does with other British films dealing with addiction, poverty and urban blight. The unconventional association between the film's gritty content (inner city junkie despair) and its flamboyant form (colourful set design, self-consciously dramatic camera angles and movement, surreal imagery and special effects, utilization of dream sequences, hallucinations, voice over narration, geometric *mise en scene* and so on) are masterfully controlled by director Danny Boyle and his team of collaborators, facilitating the creation of a really quite unique film experience. This discord between the film's destitute

Diane would have a greater presence in the story than she does – presumably as a way of countering the impression that the film would have a narrow, male appeal” (Smith 90).

subjects and rich visuals was meticulously established by Boyle, who realized it was the key to the film's artistic (and financial) success:

British cinematic culture has a very strong tradition of dogged realism, and that's something we fought against. We didn't want this to be the kind of drug film that has a lot of bleak shots of housing estates as its context. The book is about the spirit within the characters, which is what we tried to capture. It's meant to be from [the addict's] point of view, rather than that of outsiders who don't do heroin.

So we've got this incredibly seductive, energetic opening and all of this talk about heroin being better than the best orgasm you've had multiplied by a thousand. Then *Trainspotting* becomes like any other drug film, in that you see some of the costs involved. But you've got to use different techniques to get an audience to that point, or people won't go near a heroin film. (Thompson 80)

In some respects, this stylish showiness actually makes the film more like the book and was an attempt to recreate on screen some of the clever structural and linguistic feats that helped make Welsh's novel such an engrossing experience. Although *Trainspotting* is less overtly formally experimental and eccentric than some of his later works (in particular the hallucinogenic *Marabou Stork Nightmares* and *Filth*, much of which is narrated by a tapeworm), it is nonetheless (similar to the film) innovative in its use of various disarming strategies which create a compelling friction between the novel's subject and its mode of presentation. In ways that we might perhaps not expect, then, given the often dire subject matter, *Trainspotting* is never less than engrossing from its memorably propulsive opening sequence which is a spectacular display of razor sharp editing and witty direction.

The film begins explosively to the tune of Iggy Pop's "Lust for Life", as we see Renton leaping over the camera from behind and into the frame, entering our field of view at a sprint. Being chased at speed through the streets of Edinburgh by police, he throws himself onto the hood of a car that is blocking his path and laughs with carefree

and manic glee directly into the camera. The necessary energy of the shot is in large part achieved by that fact that the camera is moving at great velocity from the moment the film begins, an effect that was captured by a cameraman lying flat on his back on a board that was attached to the side of a motorcycle. As the classic punk anthem gradually builds in momentum, this frenetic opening image is spliced together with fragments of other scenes that shrewdly serve both to introduce the film's main characters and to articulate, in a now famous speech, *Trainspotting's* ideological position. The opening of the film is, in fact, arguably so well assembled that it at times overshadows some of the other remarkable moments that follow it. However, this is largely unavoidable due to the importance of establishing immediately the logic that the viewer must use in order to interpret all the events that transpire. Our attention needs to be unwaveringly fixed on Renton's speech if we are to read the film in the way Boyle and company intend us to. As such, as the song continues to play (providing not only energy but, lyrically, offering a complicating gloss on both the on screen action and inaugural manifesto), Renton's voice is heard over the music stating in a matter-of-fact manner that is expressive of cool outrage:

Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family.
Choose a fucking big television. Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players and electrical tin-openers.

Choose good health, low cholesterol and dental insurance. Choose fixed interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. Choose leisure wear and matching luggage. Choose a three piece suite on higher purchase in a range of fucking fabrics. Choose DIY and wondering who the fuck you are on a Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing, spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fucking junk food into your mouth.

Choose rotting away at the end of it all, pissing your last in a miserable home, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish fucked up brats that you've spawned to replace yourself. Choose your future. Choose life. But why would I want to do a thing like that? I chose not to choose life.

I chose something else. And the reasons? There are no reasons. Who needs reasons when you've got heroin?

As Renton makes the speech that is (albeit ironically, given the reversed context) repeated at the end of the film and which was (alas, un-ironically) endlessly reprinted on countless t-shirts and posters and various other consumer collectibles, we see images of him and his ragged group of friends standing as stark ironic counterparts to the robust vision of bourgeois conformity and middle class values he is recounting. We are sharply thrown from one scene to another, each of which challenges the logic of Renton's voiceover. While this is happening, we are simultaneously introduced (in freeze frame, using titles printed over shots of members of the gang in action—a device that was particularly effective in the film's advertising campaign) to each of the central characters.

So, as the narration refers to good health, we meet the gang, who are participating in a five-a-side football (soccer) match but clearly not fitting in with the desired sportiness of the competition. Begbie is seen committing a characteristically nasty foul and then screaming with feral glee. The waifish Spud (clad in what looks suspiciously like children's pajamas) seems the very model of an unathletic existence, dodging the ball which hurtles into the back of the net he is supposed to be protecting. As the speech lists the contents of a happy consumer's home, we are shown the necessary minimalism of the typical skag den, where everything that is not absolutely structurally necessary has been sold for drug money. The compulsive energy of the speech is finally entirely undermined as we see our hero, in slow motion (and in unison with his own spoken demands to "Choose your future. Choose life..."), collapsing backwards into drug-induced oblivion from a standing position with a needle in his arm and a lit cigarette hanging from his lips. As the motivational speech winds down, Renton is framed lying flat on his back on the

floor of a disarmingly barren apartment, a breath of smoke escaping from his unconscious body: an utter perversion of exactly the kind of ‘normal’ life his speech had alluded to.

To an unusual degree, this introductory manifesto establishes the logic that will dictate the rest of the film. Renton chooses to choose heroin instead of ‘life’ and all the things with which it is conventionally associated, and it is this rejection (or, more accurately, replacement) that implicitly governs the rest of the action. In this regard, *Trainspotting* is an exploration of the differences and similarities between the kinds of existence that each choice entails. More importantly, it simultaneously suggests that to ‘choose life’ (always equated with a normal, consumerist bourgeois way of being) is precisely that: a choice, and one that can therefore be replaced wholesale.

The enigmatic and much discussed title also points to the centrality of this aspect of *Trainspotting*’s ideological critique. As Murray Smith observes:

‘I’m searchin’ for my mainline’, sang Lou Reed in 1968. A whole cluster of train-related metaphors have long existed within drug culture (tracks and tramlines for puncture marks; mainlining and tracking for intravenous injection; riding the train for cocaine use). This imagery has existed parallel with, but separate from, the classic image of the trainspotter – until the advent of *Trainspotting*, which conjoined them. So on the one hand, we have the rather sad, but innocent, pre-pubescent business of watching for trains and checking them off a vast list; and on the other, shooting up. *Trainspotting* fuses these apparently distant activities around the notion of male obsessiveness and the bored, dead-end existence that it accompanies, casting an air of innocence on the heroin addict, a shroud of pessimism on the spotty list-checker. But what about the *actual* trains that criss-cross the film, beginning with the rattling tracks heard over the film’s title credit? What are *they* doing there? (Notably, the title is never explained in the film, a fact which accentuates its ambiguity and symbolic richness.) Do they merely echo the meanings so far discussed, or do they thicken the symbolic resonance of the title still further?

To be a trainspotter – in the literal sense – is to stand for hours, in the same place, watching trains go by. To board a train

is to go somewhere, to move on. To move on is to open oneself up to change. Renton is the character who travels most often by train, and the film *Trainspotting* is above all his story, a story of reckless joy, desolation, and self-reinvention. (Smith 17)

Although the title (as with so many elements in the film) is ambiguous enough to support such a reading, other interpretations are more in keeping with *Trainspotting*'s central themes and critical interests. In an interview, Welsh suggested that the title alludes to the fact that both trainspotting and heroin addiction are ways "to give your pointless life structure" (Welsh, in Leland 53). The majority of critics of the novel and film have taken this view, acknowledging that the title is "a metaphor for shooting heroin and the obsessional, senseless nature of the addict's life," (Cardullo 159) or simply that it relates to "the pointlessness of drug addiction" (Kerr 70). Again, although this type of interpretation is clearly viable, as Renton's introductory manifesto makes clear, the film takes the position that one seemingly pointless and arbitrary way of living is as good as another. What is missing from these readings of the title is the third and most important way of structuring a pointless life: the normal 'life' that Renton rejects in the film's opening montage. We certainly ought to consider the initially strange points of overlap between trainspotting and drug addiction because this is a necessary first step to making the further and crucial analytical leap that enables an engaged reading of the film's politics. More importantly, we must consider a wholly conventional existence in precisely the same way, as perfectly analogous to any other way of being, as a choice we make about how to lead our lives, how to spend our time, and what to consider important.

By presenting an alternative vision to the one which the film articulates in the introductory speech but, tellingly, is never really shown to us other than in its most

debased form,¹³ it is a film which has at its core a critical function that is simultaneously straightforward and more sophisticated than it initially appears. Although the narrative is a good deal more complex than such an explanation suggests, *Trainspotting* is, as Boyle mentions, loosely split into two halves¹⁴. In the more tonally pleasurable early section of the film, the risky pleasures of heroin are rhapsodized in glorious detail whereas the latter half aims to demonstrate with equal flair the miseries that such a lifestyle seems invariably to entail. Typically, each half contains some measure of the qualities of its opposite, often in the form of relapses, slip-ups, and falls on or off the proverbial wagon. Thus, the first sequence contains many incidents of horror and the latter moments of great ecstasy—each associated with an inability (or more often an unwillingness) to stay entirely stoned *or* sober. The loose divide between the two segments is maintained largely through the filmmakers' manipulation of tone, in which incidents of hardship in the early part of the film are typically lightened with a comic touch and moments of joy in the latter half are cast in a more muted or subdued tone.

¹³Although, as we shall see, *Trainspotting* does contain several symbols of the bourgeois life that Renton rejects, they are certainly less recurrent and more marginalized than might typically be the case in a film which takes such a life, albeit negatively, as its subject. The near complete omission of positive iconography of normal life (and, significantly, of trainspotters) has been entirely overlooked by critics, but is relevant insofar as it falls in line with the film's broader pattern of reversing value laden hegemonic hierarchies which validate one way of life and erase the possibility of all others. *Trainspotting* cunningly inverts this dynamic to make the 'life' it speaks of but never positively depicts (we see no shots of a young and attractive family enjoying the range of pleasures which conventional living most definitely affords) the strange and perverse other.

¹⁴Several critics have argued that the film's tone is bifurcated around the death of baby Dawn. In an *Empire* review, Neil Jeffries noted this marks a "stunning turnaround" in the narrative wherein "it all goes pear-shaped, naturally, and no one is surprised, because by now the message is sinking in: heroin is for losers" (Jeffries, in Stollery, 65). Although the film's attitude toward a life structured around heroin is a good deal more complex than Jeffries analysis suggests, he is right to assert that this awful event acts as a catalyst for a shift to a more dark and introspective tone.

Through this careful inflection, the ‘choose life or choose not to choose life’ equation is kept at the fore. The narrative spirals around the demands and rewards associated with each state. Renton and company must steal and scam in order to stay on drugs, and the necessarily constant routine of acquisition and consumption is no small feat in itself. Although a tricky and difficult existence to maintain, heroin use is in some ways worth the effort not only for the exquisite pleasures it brings, but because, ironically, it simplifies the junkie’s life to such a remarkable extent:

—Thing is though, Spud, whin yir intae skag, that’s it. That’s aw yuv goat tae worry about.... Whin yir oan junk, aw ye worry about is scorin. Oaf the gear, ye worry about loads ay things. Nae money, cannae git pushed. Goat money, drinkin too much. Cannae git a bird, nae chance ay a ride. Git a bird, too much hassle, cannae breathe withoot her gittin oan yir case. Either that, or ye blow it, and feel aw guilty. Ye worry about bills, food, bailiffs, these Jambo Nazi scum beatin us, aw the things that ye couldnae gie a fuck about whin yuv goat a real junk habit. Yuv just goat one thing tae worry about. The simplicity ay it aw. Ken what ah mean? (Welsh 132)

Although achieving this state of focused simplicity takes considerable energy and ingenuity, returning to a conventional life is a more difficult proposition entirely, especially since the rewards seem so comparatively meager. It is a transition that is hard in no small part precisely because the payoff appears quite nominal and may well be not worth the effort. Getting off heroin, obviously, is an inherently complicated process, and one that takes a good deal of time, effort and resource management. The extent to which this is the case is pervasively on display throughout the film, which focuses relentlessly on the needs of the body.¹⁵ We see this, for instance, when the dormant state of Renton’s

¹⁵ Because of their obsessive and graphic interest in the rhythms and desires of the body, both novel and film versions of *Trainspotting* could reasonably be read as being about Renton’s desire to use his own flesh in order to exert control in the last domain where such a thing is possible (the initial brawls in *Fight Club* ought to be read as an expression

junk-paralyzed bowels comes to a messy end because of heroin withdrawal, which he was trying to rectify using opium suppositories, which are rapidly expelled from his body because of the cravings which made them necessary in the first place.

These conflicting desires give rise to another of the film's most memorable and surreal scenes, wherein Renton is forced to climb into what is ominously identified as 'the worst toilet in Scotland'. In following the film's pattern of commingling foul images with a sublime touch, he is forced to descend entirely, headfirst, into the rank toilet (which becomes a watery paradise as he swims down amid beautiful aquatic plants to the soothing tune of Bizet's 'Carmen') in search of the insufficiently dissolved suppositories he needs to use again. Similarly, his seduction at the hands of Dianne, a disturbingly mature schoolgirl (of 14) occurs because his libido is reawakened on a drunken night out after giving up heroin. Unlike alcohol, the stronger drug is associated in the film with a highly ambiguous, polymorphously perverse sexuality that is a stark counterpoint to the film's resolutely degraded view of the possibilities of standard heterosexual relations. 'Normal' relationships in the film tend always to be inscribed with negative associations, even casual encounters. Sick Boy is mean-spirited and cynically manipulative to his many girlfriends, Begbie is monstrously violent, Spud is impotent, Tommy's breakup causes his rapid descent from good health to the ravages of a fatal HIV related sickness. And so it comes as little surprise when the early stages of Renton's transition from a vaguely defined heroin-induced sexuality to a 'normal' set of heterosexual desires ends badly in what is, at least legally, child molestation. Indeed, almost every event that occurs

of the same imperative). Almost entirely powerless in most other capacities, Renton can be seen to exercise authority in the last possible venue available to him, at an almost cellular level. Given the extent to which *Trainspotting* is chock full of instances of

in the film (barring scenes whose primary goal is character development) is motivated by, or associated with, one of the twin desires articulated in Renton's famous speech at the film's outset. This range of associations expands as the film develops, so that 'life' and 'not life' become linked with an ever-increasing range of opposed practices and attitudes in every possible sphere of existence, defamiliarizing the degree to which we are products of the lives we choose to lead in ways that are not always transparent to us.

Choose not to Choose Life: The Ideology of *Trainspotting*

The desire to live is a political decision. Who wants a world in which the guarantee that we shall not die of starvation entails the risk of dying of boredom?

- Raul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*

It is worth noting here that Renton's inaugural and all-important manifesto is significantly modified during the transition from page to screen, and it is crucial to consider the important nature of this change, and of other similar alterations. The primary shift (other than making Renton the unequivocal focal point of the narrative) from an ideological perspective, is the simplification of the film's position vis à vis the culturally subversive value of heroin. Whereas the novel contains dozens of explicitly political speeches and instances of socioeconomic critique, the film's politics are developed in a much less sustained way and are entirely predicated on using the opening scene's "choose life" speech as a template with which to read the rest of the film. The strategy used in each version has something to recommend it. Whereas the novel is more consistently politically engaged, the film is more forceful in its critique and much clearer

spectacular lapses of bodily control, heroin addiction at least presents the illusion of reducing the number of conflicting physical demands down to a manageable one.

(or, arguably, more simplistic) in the specific manner in which this critique will be expressed. By substantially reducing the frequency with which characters explicitly attack the (spatially and temporally) specific policies and social practices that confine them to a limited range of options, the filmmakers forge a form of criticism and resistance that is instead directed at the broader structures which authorize and naturalize more specific forms of oppression. Although somewhat reductive, I would suggest that, in its choice of target(s), *Trainspotting* the novel is local whereas the film is global. *Trainspotting* the film is concerned with defamiliarizing (with an eye to subversion) the pervasive ideological influence of late-capitalism whereas the novel is principally interested in the ways it is manifested in a particular time and place.

The novel's Renton is more frequently associated with politicized speech than any other narrator, in part, because, as the group's most educated member, he is in possession of a greater critical vocabulary than, for instance, the barely literate Spud. But these moments are largely absent from the film as a consequence of its broader focus of critique, and this aspect of his character is only apparent in the almost identical speech which brackets the action at the film's opening and close, and which therefore occupies an inherently privileged position in the narrative. On top of the memorable presentation of Renton's manifesto at the film's inception, its repetition (albeit in a slightly modified form) ensures its centrality to any analysis of the film's politics. *Trainspotting* the film concludes with Renton once more stealing (this time the loot is the profits from a drug deal he has made with his friends) and planning his escape (now from his outraged friends) to a more ordinary life. This is obviously a full reversal from his earlier stance. While the second appearance of this speech is slightly modified (for instance by its

expanded list of consumable options), the major transformation is one enacted by contrasting circumstances. This time, moreover, the connection between the subject of his speech and the viewer's life is made even more explicit as Renton directly addresses his comments to the viewer, forcing us to consider our own implicatedness in the choices we make and to consider them as such:

So why did I do it? I could offer a million answers, all false. The truth is that I'm a bad person, but that's going to change. This is the last of this sort of thing. I'm cleaning up and I'm moving on, going straight and choosing life. I'm looking forward to it already. I'm going to be just like you: the job, the family, the fucking big television, the washing machine, the car, the compact disc and electrical tin opener, good health, low cholesterol, dental insurance, mortgage, starter home, leisurewear, luggage, three-piece suite, DIY, game shows, junk food, children, walks in the park, nine to five, good at golf, washing the car, choice sweaters, family Christmas, indexed pension, tax exemption, clearing the gutters, getting by, looking ahead, to the day you die.

In Welsh's novel, the equivalent speech is far less centralized, both by virtue of the number of similar declarations made by Renton throughout and by its less eye-catching position at the end of a chapter near the middle of the book. In this section, entitled (with typical irony) "Searching for the Inner Man," Renton recounts how he has attempted to cure himself utilizing all manner of therapeutic techniques. He has tried to account for the genesis of his heroin addiction with various different counseling professionals (a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist, and social worker), who have all failed to grasp the precise nature of the allure of the drug, which for Renton is a *cultural* phenomena:

Society invents a spurious convoluted logic tae absorb and change people whae's behaviour is outside its mainstream. Suppose that ah ken aw the pros and cons, know that ah'm gaunnae huv a short life, am ay sound mind etcetera, but still want tae use smack? They won't let ye dae it. They won't let ye dae it, because its seen as a sign ay thir ain failure. The fact that ye jist simply choose tae reject whit they huv tae offer. Choose us. Choose life. Choose mortgage payments; choose washing machines; choose cars; choose sitting oan a couch watching mind-numbing and spirit-crushing

game shows, stuffing fucking junk food intae yir mooth. Choose rotting away, pishing and shiteing yersel in a home, a total fuckin embarrassment tae the selfish, fucked-up brats ye've produced. Choose life.

Well, ah choose no tae choose life. If the cunts cannae handle that, its thair fuckin problem. As Harry Lauder sais, ah jist intend tae keep right on to the end of the road...(Welsh 187-188)

Although this is clearly the original source of the speech made famous by the film, critics tend to have overlooked the fact that various less explicit echoes of this speech are disseminated throughout the novel and are done so in a way that suggests its thematic centrality to both texts. In these moments, we can see not only why the filmmakers made his declaration more central but also the extent to which it has a greater significance in the novel than is typically acknowledged. For instance, when Renton is in the awful “junky’s limbo” (195) of withdrawal and trapped between the highs of heroin addiction and lows of sobriety, his disjointed, stream of consciousness moaning is clearly meant to remind us of the “choose life” speech he made in the previous chapter:

REHABILITATE
FASCISM
NICE WIFE
NICE BAIRNS
NICE HOOSE
NICE JOAB
NICE (195)

In a similar way, when Sick Boy comes to visit the ailing Renton, the advice he passes along is to “Just say no. It’s easy. Choose Life” (197). In the following chapter, we are once more subtly reminded of the importance of the speech as Renton uses virtually identical language to express the pitying contempt he feels for Sharon, his brother’s pregnant widow. After he has had sex with her in a bathroom at his brother’s funeral, he declares that “She was caught in this git-a-man, git-a-bairn, git-a-hoose shite that lassies

git drummed intae them, and hud nae real chance ay defining hersel outside ay they mashed-tatties-fir-brains terms ay reference” (220).

What all four incarnations of this speech share is the defamiliarization of a certain conventional way of living that is, however surreptitiously, inherently connected to a set of bourgeois values. As the final usage suggests, the novel is not simply about dumbly praising heroin’s perception shifting abilities as being somehow inherently subversive or counter-cultural but about using it as a tool with which to interrogate from a fresh vantage point a more conventional life. The analogy that the text establishes is not strictly about heroin *per se* but about how an entire life with attendant values and practices builds up around it. In the new schema which the film articulates, heroin is therefore equivalent to the organizing function of money (as the thing which must be attained at all costs) in our culture. The centrality of the ‘choose life’ speech in the film and its dissemination throughout the novel direct us to ask ourselves to what extent our own lives are *genuinely* more satisfying or enriching than that of the typically maligned and hopeless addict. In this sense, the privileging of heroin over money is as arbitrary (and unnatural) as its more familiar and widely accepted opposite.¹⁶

The allure of the drug for Renton, then, other than its obvious narcotic appeal, lies in its status as an alternative existence, one which is defined by what it is not. And it is

¹⁶ The life of the addict, when considered from a certain angle, is after all not so wholly abnormal. In *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* Slavoj Žižek persuasively argues that the fundamental difference between the junkie and the conventional subject is the decadent and masochistic nature of his consumption. Arguing that the late-capitalist subject is defined not by an excess of consumption but by the appearance of restraint, he explains that “Today’s preoccupation with drug addiction as the ultimate danger to the social edifice can be properly understood only against the background of the predominate subjective economy of consumption as the form of appearance of thrift” (Žižek 260). In a culture oriented around consumption, then, the junkie is considered deviant because he is

from this perspective that the film must be read. Rather than enter the heated debate which the *Trainspotting* phenomena generated about drug (ab)use¹⁷ from the standard defensive posture that although it may sporadically (and dangerously) glamorize heroin addiction, it ultimately tempers this seductive vision with the jarringly hard doses of junkie reality it delivers (friends with AIDS, dead babies, destitution, the agonies of withdrawal, omnipresent threat of overdose), I will offer a less popular reading. It needs to be stressed that I have no interest in aligning myself with those who used the success of *Trainspotting* the film as a springboard for a call to increase prohibitions on drug use (quite the contrary) or at least enforce its responsible representation onscreen (ditto). However, it seems that many of these reactionary (and often unsophisticated) readers of the film were quite correct in the basic supposition that informs their argument. It is disingenuous, I think, considering the sheer rollicking pleasure the film depicts and delivers, to suggest that it does not present heroin consumption as an exquisitely enjoyable pastime. Those who argue so fervently that the film makes heroin cool or sexy

“the only true ‘subject of consumption’, the only one who consumes himself utterly, to his very death, in his unbound *jouissance*” (44).

¹⁷ The timing of the film’s release was partly responsible for generating these kinds of reactions, as growing concern about the huge number of young people using ecstasy reached its zenith with the much publicized drug-related death of Leah Betts a few months before the film opened. Because of the cultural climate of unease about rising recreational drug use into which *Trainspotting* was introduced, its perceived attitude toward drugs colored many critics’ responses. In the *Sunday Times*, for instance, Tom Shone forcefully echoed the view of many that *Trainspotting*’s “‘indiscriminate regard for the Spunky Spirit of renegade youth’ made it a virtual advert for heroin, ‘the film about drugs that likes to say YES!’” (Shone, in Stollery 64). For discussion of those whose responses to the films were specifically fueled by concerns about its glorification of heroin addiction, see “Drug Film attacked for Glamorizing Heroin” in the *Independent* (16 February 1996 6) and Stollery (62-66).

are quite right. Where they are wrong is when they extend this reading to suggest that this glamourization is a problem, that it makes it a bad film.¹⁸

Trainspotting absolutely glorifies junkie life, and so it must, since its aim is to present a character for whom heroin addiction is a reasonable alternative to a conventional life. It certainly seems a risky proposition to suggest that an existence oriented around life-threatening intravenous drugs may be no less foolish or ill-conceived a choice than the 'life' detailed by Renton in the opening scene. However, this is precisely the purposefully disturbing question at the core of the film and one which has largely escaped critical scrutiny simply because it seems so outlandish. Can what our culture offers really be sanely, indeed, *sensibly*, supplanted with a junkie lifestyle? What do we make of a film that dares to suggest, or so it appears, that *not* making this choice is the act of madness? And what of the culture that produces such a seemingly suicidal vision?

Such an approach to *Trainspotting* is unconventional precisely because it seems predicated on a value system entirely the opposite of our own (in which devoting one's life to heroin is abnormal and therefore bad, and not doing so is normal and therefore good). Inverted visions of this sort are intolerable and invariably elicit strong negative responses. Films dealing with self-destructive behaviour, it is assumed, have a responsibility to the viewer to indict that behaviour, to make its aberration explicit. Ambiguity on this front is problematic to the extreme. Consider audience bewilderment at seemingly rational filmic suicides, as in the case of the lonely failure, Ben, who

¹⁸ This misreading also applies, of course, to those who aim to defend the film by inversely arguing that *Trainspotting* is a good film in large part because it does not glorify junkie life. Ironically, it can *only* be a good film, one which meets its own goals, if it successfully glamourizes drug use.

chooses to drink himself to death in *Leaving Las Vegas* (Mike Figgis, 1995). The horror that is generated by the fact that even though as events unfold he falls in love, he still adheres to his plan to drink himself to death is intense. Watching the film, we are led to believe based on our prior familiarity with this kind of despairing narrative that now he has found a soul-mate and, therefore, presumably has a reason to live (for surely we only need one), his death will be averted. That he goes ahead with his calculated plan in spite of the presence of what seems like an alluring lifeline is bewildering. He chooses a slow and agonizing death when he has every reason to stay alive simply because life, the life most of us choose to live, is too hard for him to bear. It does not seem the act of a madman since Ben exhibits a cool logic with regards to the depths of his unhappiness, yet it apparently must be one if it is to be dramatically comprehensible. Although it is now virtually impossible to shock or disturb desensitized audiences with acts of violence directed against other people, it is surprisingly easy to instill dread in a viewer at the very sight of an individual turning their hands against themselves with murderous intent especially if their insanity has not been adequately established. We have been trained as consumers of popular culture to look to motive, whose presence is both soothing and dramatically satisfying regardless of how illogical and depraved its particular manifestation may seem to us.¹⁹ Part of the task of *Trainspotting*, and why its alternative

¹⁹ No trend better illustrates this strange desire for comprehensible conduct at all costs than the contemporary police drama, in all its forms. Again and again we see the serial killer presented as a complex puzzle to be solved, so that even the basest depths of madness and the most (literally) antisocial behaviours do not seem, and must not be seen, to occur without a motive. On television and in films, we are repeatedly introduced to the killer whose evil conduct is the physical manifestation of a pathology that is neatly organized around some arbitrary structuring device. So the killer kills because of unresolved childhood trauma, or according to religious or philosophical or mathematical or artistic rules, but never without a pattern and never without a reason. The hunger for motive is so pronounced as to have seemingly infiltrated the grammar we use to discuss

vision was such a hard sell, is that the motive it presents is simply (although this is no simple matter) a chronic dissatisfaction with our present way of life, with things as they are.²⁰ And, obviously, this is not a motive which most people are willing to accept.

A similarly troubling dynamic underpins the revolutionary violence at the core of *Fight Club*. It generated controversy not unlike that which attached itself to *Trainspotting* and for a similar reason. Although those speaking on behalf of the film (director David Fincher, novelist Chuck Palahniuk and the film's stars) went to great lengths to send out the message that the film in no way endorses violence of any sort,²¹ this is transparently disingenuous since it quite clearly endorses all sorts of violence. Like *Trainspotting*, it is a film that is on one level about the redemptive potential of self-directed violence in which the effect of such counterintuitive behavior is tested as a viable model of resistance. The degree to which the self-evident 'message' of the film was vehemently and repeatedly denied by its makers (and its defenders) is a cautious reaction against what

terrible crimes, either fictional or real. The unimaginable specter of the killer who kills for no reason is a popular fiction which elides the real reason for his or her crimes: the killer who killed simply because they wanted to cannot be allowed to exist.

²⁰ In much the same way that the almost suicidal behavior of *Trainspotting*'s junkies can be read as constituting a (potentially redemptive) critique of their culture, in "Death and the Maiden" Žižek discerns a similarly subversive edge underscoring Ben's behavior in *Leaving Las Vegas*. Emphasizing the transgressive strangeness of Ben's desire to drink himself to death, Žižek argues that "We are not dealing here merely with passive despair and depression, but with a liberating act of decision: cynical as this may sound, *LLV* is fundamentally a bright film, a film about suicide as the only successful act. There is effectively something uncanny in a man who fully wants to die, not as a pathetic spectacular gesture, but as a fundamental decision endorsed by his whole being" (209).

²¹ The fact that such a performance is necessary is disappointingly symptomatic of our culture's treatment of controversial material. Although it is hard to fault directors and actors whose attempts to present counter-hegemonic visions must be qualified in this way, it certainly inspires nostalgia for the kind of contemptuous dismissal of the notion of critical responsibility famously articulated by Luis Buñuel. As Pauline Kael recounts, the great surrealist director "once referred to some of those who praised *Un Chien Andalou*

is clearly one of the few remaining cinematic taboos. Indeed, the final act of *Fight Club* (in which the two main characters are shown to be one and the same person) is ambiguous enough to allow the viewer to read the preceding action as little more than the actions of a madman, which can be seen to contain and limit the film's broader and more subversive content. While *The Idiots* inspires outrage and disgust because its vision seems both mean and stupid, *Trainspotting* and *Fight Club* are seemingly only tolerable if the viewer is able to essentially enter a state of denial about their actual content, which cannot be read literally. However simplistic it may seem, though, this is sometimes precisely the way in which a film should be viewed. Or, at the very least, superficial readings should not be instinctively overlooked or uncritically dismissed simply because they are so apparent. In the case of *Trainspotting*, a cigar might not always be a cigar, but we should not forget that it is sometimes one. We ought at least to consider it on its own terms, and read it in the way it so insistently invites us to.

The ideology of language

Critics (especially those who most enthusiastically endorsed it) have tended to adopt these positive positions by disregarding what the ideological dialectic that is at play within *Trainspotting* actually suggests about the value of what our culture has to offer. The richness and originality of the film present more than enough material for critics to admire even if they either miss the point of its political stance or if they simply choose to reject it.²² Ironically, though, I would say it is impossible to genuinely admire

as 'that crowd of imbeciles who find the film beautiful or poetic when it is fundamentally a desperate and passionate call to murder'" (Marcus 8).

²² The majority of critics of the film have either entirely disregarded the film's political interests or substantially downplayed their importance. In "Underbelly UK: The 1990s

Trainspotting in a substantive way if you *do not* think it successfully glamorizes the junkie lifestyle as it is criticizing a more conventional one. Both the film and novel versions are analyses of the various rewards associated with either way of living, although they go about their inquiry in very different ways. A consideration of how the two incarnations vary in the forms of critique they adopt sheds some light on the overlooked centrality of the relationship between the two modes of existence interrogated.

Screenwriter John Hodge's decision to shift the focus of the narrative entirely toward Renton is suggestive of a recognition on his part about Welsh's core thematic concern, since Renton is invariably the mouthpiece through which the novel makes its politics known. To varying degrees, all of the novel's characters are permanently outraged about the state of their nation or the more immediate conditions of their existence, but their critique seldom attains any kind of precision or sophistication. Regrettably, the typical method of expression favoured by Begbie and Sick Boy is to actually redirect the oppressive energies that bear down on them toward those in even more difficult social circumstances. This is an unfortunately popular strategy to adopt, both in *Trainspotting* and in life, in that it enables the marginalized at least the illusion of being able to assume the role of the marginalizer which may well seem like the only

underclass film, masculinity and the ideologies of 'new' Britain," Claire Monk reads *Trainspotting* as "symptomatic of the drift away from social analysis, commitment or action which typified the 1990s" (Monk 286). Derek Paget suggests that the filmmakers are guilty of "eschewing social realism and overt politics" (Paget 139), echoing playwright David Greig's appraisal that "it isn't any [political] use, however entertaining it may be, and however interesting it may be, simply to take a snapshot of a group of people... in the way that a film like *Trainspotting* did" (Greig 102). Other critics, like Martin Stollery, suggest that the cultural critique the film presented in the opening scene is not part of a broader examination of other ways of living and that *Trainspotting*

available way to exert any control over one's situation. It is not an accident that Sick Boy chooses poor young women to steal from and prostitute, nor that his most contemptuous verbal attacks are directed at other members of the underclass who are less attractive or ambitious than he is. Almost all of Begbie's considerable rage is channeled down toward those who, like his pregnant girlfriend, are even more victimized by the structures of society than he is. As such, Begbie habitually supplements his routine spousal abuse by "baseball-batting every fucker that's different; pakis, poofs, n whut huv ye," (78) ironically ensuring his enduring subordination by precluding the possibility of any kind of collaboration between similarly oppressed parties.²³ The characters in *Trainspotting* all seem at least dimly aware that their social standing is in some ways proscribed by broad cultural policies designed to empower others at their expense. In fact, they seem to have an almost instinctive understanding of why their cultural situation is as it is, but they seem so convinced of the almost genetic origins of their subordination that it is not a subject that even warrants discussion. Again in this regard, we ought to remember Renton's analysis of Spud's character: "Even in his Ma's womb, you would have had to define Spud less as a foetus, more as a set of dormant drug and personality problems" (328).

Renton, however, is, for various reasons, better able to dissect his outrage and chart the circulation of power through his world. As such, his speech is peppered to a conspicuous degree with all manner of attacks on the specifics of his socio-economic predicament, often demonstrated through his use of the language of economics to draw a

"certainly does not represent any positive alternatives to the ideology of the enterprise culture" (Stollery 8).

link between financial interactions and narcotic ones so as to challenge the moral hierarchy that vilifies the one and endorses the other. He is aware that junkie friendships are inherently limited, agreeing with his dealer that there are “Nae friends in this game. Jist associates” (Welsh 6) and that these relationships are so marked by raw need that they “ended with the completion of the transaction” (23). Even when he is recounting his refusal to participate in the conventional economy by entering the legitimate workforce, he does so in a way that ironically challenges its value-laden jargon. In a manner of speaking, he is professionally unemployed: “What he did, at least work-wise, was nothing. He was in a syndicate which operated a giro fraud system” (146) yet he even frames his joblessness in business rhetoric, adding that “he felt that he deserved this money, as the management skills employed to maintain such a state of affairs were fairly extensive” (146). The persistent and nuanced use of this kind of language in an area where it seems not to belong is not simply included to elicit ironic laughter but in order to show how the two worlds that *Trainspotting* holds up against each other are not as different as they may appear, that neither has an unquestionable value over the other, and that each is a viable choice in its own separate way.

However, although more familiar with the language of commerce than his friends, Renton shows no real interest in the consumption of anything other than drugs and is not in possession of what anyone would call financial savvy. Even in the moment of the text where the spheres of free enterprise and junkie exchange come closest to one another—the drug deal near the film’s conclusion—Renton and his fellow novice dealers are woefully ill-equipped to function successfully. Significantly, the scene takes place in

²³ Although it should be noted that all of *Trainspotting*’s characters are adamant, and (unfortunately) rightly so, in their belief that conventional forms of political resistance

London, one of the more potent signifiers of consumer capitalism in *Trainspotting*, and we are therefore already anticipating an incident inspired by the collision of these symbolic worlds. In town to sell the large stash of heroin they have stumbled across, their unfamiliarity with negotiating techniques is all too apparent. This scene not only demonstrates their fundamental inability to master the 'real world' but it also marks the culmination of the pattern of applying economic language to the world of drug use, a trend whose persistence suggests is more than incidental to *Trainspotting's* broader ideological aspirations:

Gilbert was a professional who had worked in drug-dealing for a long time. He'd buy and sell anything. For him it was strictly business, and he refused to differentiate it from any other entrepreneurial activity. State intervention in the form of police and courts merely constituted another business risk. It was, however, a risk worth taking, considering the supernormal profits. A classic middle-man, Gilbert was, by nature of his contacts and his venture capital, able to procure drugs, hold them, cut them and sell them to smaller distributors.

Straight away, Gilbert clocks the Scottish guys as small-time wasters who have stumbled on a big deal. He is impressed, however, by the quality of their gear. He offers them £15,000, prepared to go as high as £17,000. They want £20,000, prepared to go as low as £18,000. The deal is clinched at £16,000. Gilbert will make £60,000 minimum once the gear is cut up and distributed.

He finds it tiresome negotiating with a bunch of fucked-up losers from the wrong side of the border. He'd rather be dealing with the person who sold it to them. If their supplier was desperate enough to punt such good gear to this squad of fuck-ups, then he didn't really understand the business. Gilbert could have turned him onto some real money.... Despite his reservations, he cultivated his new business associates. Anyone desperate enough to punt them this gear once, could be daft enough to do it again. (339-340)

Trainspotting's positing of two seemingly opposed spheres of life (as it is generally envisioned) versus its other (Renton's junkie-dom) draws attention to otherwise

can do nothing to alter the conditions of their existence.

unconsidered connections by upsetting our conventional privileging of the one (choosing life) at the expense of the other (choosing not to choose life/choosing heroin):

From a critical perspective, this parallel is absolutely vital. Aligning a life organized around drugs with one arranged more conventionally (around consumerist acquisition and the accompanying bourgeois values) allows for a defamiliarization of the normalcy or naturalness of our present way of living. The identification of “life” with its particular contemporary mode of expression helps to set aside (and satirize) the process of ex-nomination necessitated by all hegemonic systems. Furthermore, its repetitive connection with the word “choice” directly complicates the ‘not to be questioned’ nature of the existence which Renton rejects. His two speeches make apparent the extent to which our conventional way of life can be easily made strange. Normal life is unveiled as a construct that can be chosen (and therefore rejected) and which can quite easily be replaced with something else which reveals the arbitrariness and ephemerality of its claims to naturalness. While *Trainspotting* never makes the lives it depict seem as comfortable and natural as those it decries (nor could it), it does I think succeed in at least opening up the possibility that a massive transformation of one’s own life is a genuine and attainable thing to aspire to, even if the alternative counter-vision may not be to everyone’s liking. Certainly, it seems to suggest, this is the only way things will change.

However, it is the contiguous use of politico-economic language that makes this relationship tangible throughout the text. Welsh’s sustained use of this dynamic is also cleverly modulated and varies between characters, which helps to associate them with one particular ‘life’ over another as it also suggests the mirrored relationship between the two. Renton’s detachment from bourgeois values is in part signaled by the negative

connotations he attaches to these signifiers. He drops out of university because he does not want to be associated with the “boring, middle-class cunts” (182) that teach and study there. The politician who makes a speech about Renton’s brother’s death is particularly loathed: “Some ruling class cunt, a junior minister or something, says in his Oxbridge voice how Billy was a brave man... This fucking walking abortion says that his killers will be ruthlessly hunted down. So they fuckin should. All the wey tae the houses of parliament” (211). This hatred exists, it should be noted, in spite of the fact that Renton also hated his brother, whom he considered a “Fuckin imperialist lackey” (133) and a “white-trash tool of the rich” (211). This language suggests that Renton’s animosity stems more from the fact that the minister is a ‘ruling class cunt’ than it does from any perceived complicity in Billy’s death. Always taking the long view, it genuinely does not seem to be the death of his brother that enrages him but the politics that got him killed in the first place—as well as the hypocrisy and ignorance which enable such a pointless death to be considered heroic, noble, or patriotic. In this regard, both Billy and the junior minister are simply different but equally necessary expressions of the same fundamental problem.

Indeed, virtually all of Renton’s passionate outbursts are linguistically connected to the bourgeois life he despises and which he holds responsible for most everything that ails our culture and his particular place in it. On world hunger: “thousands ay bairns in other countries, and mibbe a few in this yin, will be deid. In the time it takes us tae dae this, thousands ay rich bastards will be thousands ay pounds richer, as investments ripen” (222). On Edinburgh’s famous Princes Street: “we both hate walking along that hideous street, deadened by tourists and shoppers, the twin curses ay modern capitalism” (228).

On Kierkegaard: “It could be argued, with some justification, that its primarily a bourgeois, existential philosophy and would therefore seek to undermine collective societal wisdom” (166). Renton’s specific political beliefs always remain somewhat ambiguous and are defined largely (and characteristically) by what they are not. He has little patience for participation in any type of conventional political discourse, which he considers to be little more than another method of repressing genuine subversion. As such, he is dismissive of cultural icons who speak out about political causes, denouncing (rock bands) Simple Minds and U2 for their interest in “aw this patently insincere political-wi-a-small-p stuff” (133). He is very contemptuous of those who fail to adopt his total rejection of conventional party politics and who consider electoral democracy to be a site of real choice. We discover this when Renton bumps into “a fuckin spineless Labour/ Tory Party servile wankboy” (238) at a party and attacks him for his traditional belief in the Labour party as the saviour of the working man: “You’re a fuckin arsehole on two counts. One if ye think the Labour Party’s goat a chance ay ever getting in again this century, two, if ye think it would make a blind bit ay fuckin difference if they ever did” (238).²⁴ For a novel that so intently concerns itself with those who live under the long shadow cast by some of the most unequal and insensitive political policies in British

²⁴ History has shown that Renton was both wrong and right in his bitter assessment of British party politics. The Labour Party *was* reelected this century, in 1997 under the leadership of Tony Blair. However, he is correct in his assertion that this changing hands of political power would actually change nothing in the lives of real people. Ironically, Renton’s appraisal of the Labour Party’s chances of election and his further belief that the impact of this would be nominal are related. In order to take power the Labour Party had to radically transform the left wing policies that once defined it and rebrand itself as ‘New’ Labour which turned out to be precisely not Labour at all but simply a less *overtly* callous form of Conservatism.

history, it is despairingly telling that neither Renton nor any of his friends ever make a statement about the realm of politics that is anything other than scornfully hopeless.

The invocation of contemporary political and economic discourse serves not only to firmly link Renton (and ultimately the entire text) with a more radical political position, but the modulation of this device allows his friends to be variously characterized depending on the ideological position they represent and which defines them. Each of the trainspotters could be neatly fixed on a grid along an axis of where they fall along a 'choose life' spectrum. Since in many respects Spud and Begbie both occupy positions either too extreme or too simplistic (the former loves everyone, the latter hates everyone) to be considered a genuinely political stance, the opposing pole to Renton is occupied by Sick Boy. Famously aligning himself with that other symbol of Scottish style, economic conservatism, and narcissistic self-absorption, Sean Connery, Sick Boy is fond of suggesting that it is his similarity to James Bond that distinguishes him from his group of friends. However, given that Sick Boy's slickly degenerate and exploitative attitude is so glaringly self-serving, this comparison also functions as a critique of the fundamentally reactionary arch-capitalist embodied by the ideologically conservative figure of 007, whose 'cool' is purely superficial:

[Renton] can go and kill himself with drugs. Some fucking friends I have. Spud, Second-Prize, Begbie, Matty, Tommy: these punters spell L-I-M-I-T-E-D. An extremely limited company. Well, ah'm fed up to ma back teeth wi losers, no-hopers, draftpaks, schemies, junkies and the likes. I am a dynamic young man, upwardly mobile and thrusting, thrusting, thrusting...

... the socialists go on about your comrades, your class, your union and society. Fuck all that shite. The Tories go on about your employer, your country, your family. Fuck that even mair. It's me, me, fucking ME, Simon David Williamson, NUMERO FUCKING UNO, versus the world, and it's a one-sided swedge. *It's really so fucking easy... Fuck them all. I*

*admire your rampant individualism, Shimon. I shee paralleelsh wish
myshef ash a young man. (30)*

Sick Boy's behavior certainly suggests that he endorses this disturbingly Thatcherian world view, as he only ever acts out of self interest and displays absolutely zero interest in or concern for those around him. As bad a man as he is in *Trainspotting* (and he is far less charming in the novel than in the film), his sporadic pimping and habit of seducing women so as to steal from them is actually amplified in *Porno*. This (kind of) sequel to *Trainspotting* focuses much more intently on Sick Boy and his new career as a pornographer and renders him into an at times almost satirical exemplar of callous patriarchal consumer capitalism. Indeed, Sick Boy both revels in this role [gleefully referring to himself in *Porno* as "Simon de Bourgeois"(242)] but is aware enough (unlike Begbie) of contemporary values to know that he needs to disguise his selfish, destructive designs under a cloak of charm and sensitivity. Like *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman, his mastery of surfaces (primarily his own) provides him with such a degree of social power that he is able to perform heinous acts with near complete impunity. Accordingly, Sick Boy the pimp is widely well liked and more 'successful' (financially, aesthetically, sexually) than the other less well-groomed members of the group.

His elevated social status is reflected by the warm treatment he receives from Renton's parents, who seem to prefer the more conventional and reactionary masculinity embodied by Sick Boy and Begbie to the disengaged but nonetheless harmless junkie strangeness that they associate with Spud and their son. Renton is considered a worrying curiosity by his parents, who are concerned about not only his struggles with heroin addiction but also his vegetarianism and the fact that he is 'different' and 'no natural'

(212). However, the extent to which Mr. and Mrs. Renton are taken in by Sick Boy's slick charm is all too apparent when he comes to visit Renton, who is in withdrawal and under house arrest:

The bastard is charm itself. Jocular and matey banter about fitba wi ma Hun auld man, coming ower like the concerned GP family friend wi ma auld girl.

—It's a mug's game, Mrs Renton. Ah'm no tryin tae say thit ah'm blameless masel, far from it, but there comes a point whin ye jist huv tae turn yir back on that nonsense and say no.

Just say no. It's easy. Choose life. Skin Kay-uh boi Eroin.

My parents find it impossible to believe that 'Young Simon' (who's four months aulder than me, and ah never git called 'Young Mark') could possibly have anything to do wi drugs, beyond the odd youthful, experimental flirtation. Young Simon is identified with conspicuous success in their eyes. There's Young Simon's girlfriends, Young Simon's smart clathes, Young Simon's suntan, Young Simon's flat up the toon. Even Young Simon's jaunts to London are seen as more colourful chapters in the trendy, swashbuckling adventures of Leith Bannany Flat's loveable cavalier, while my trips south invariably have a seedy and unsavoury association in their eyes. Young Simon can do no wrong though. They see the cunt as some sort ay *Oor Wullie* for the video generation. (197-198)

Renton's parents' assumptions about the other members of his group reinforce the persistent notion that, regardless of their actual effect on the lives of individuals, certain ways of living are always inherently valid and others simply are not. Drugs are again a recurring metaphor for this division, as alcohol and other socially-acceptable treats such as nicotine are presented as widely approved of but nonetheless deadly alternatives to Renton and Spud's heroin use, despite considerable evidence to the contrary. Such a skewed but entirely conventional view enables even a genuine sociopath such as Begbie to be perceived as less of a threat to the prevailing social order than the stigmatized figure of the junkie, even by those who know about his pathological tendencies toward unprovoked violent outbursts:

Although they have never come out and said it, ma Ma n faither suspect that ma drug problems ur due tae ma association wi 'the laddie Murphy'. This is because Spud is a lazy, scruffy bastard, who's naturally spaced out and seem as if he's oan drugs, even when he's clean. Spud is incapable ay upsettin a spurned lover wi a bad hangover. On the other hand Begbie, total fuckin crazy psycho Beggars, is held up as an archetypal model of manhood Ecosse. Yes, there may be poor bastards picking bits ay beer glass oot ay thir faces when Franco goes oan the rampage, but the laddie works hard and plays hard etcetera, etcetera. (198)

This skewed perception again suggests the inability to rationally evaluate self-destructive behaviour which is here once again considered (even as a potentiality) to be inherently worse than actually occurring acts of violence directed at innocent parties (such as Begbie's pregnant girlfriend). Begbie's atrocious outbursts are seen as less of a threat to prevailing social norms because, regardless of how hurtful they are to others, they occur within acceptable (because recognizable and familiar) parameters. His 'hard man' persona and all its ugly manifestations are more easily digestible than the potential for harm to oneself embodied by the ostracized figure of the junkie. However, the primary function of the scene is to once again clarify and expand upon the fundamental dichotomy that constitutes the ideological spine of the narrative and to firmly locate Renton and Spud in binary opposition to Begbie and Sick Boy.

Begbie and Sick Boy fit in more neatly with prevalent cultural values than Renton and Spud largely because they are better able to make themselves superficially embody the appropriate values meant to be displayed by one in their subject position. The importance of these signifying surfaces to *Trainspotting's* overall ideological position cannot be underestimated. As the 'choose life' speech suggests, a way of life (and its accordant ideology) is defined and maintained by the things and practices which express it, even if those things and practices seem in isolation to be wholly non-ideological. For

Trainspotting to achieve its critical goals, it needs to demonstrate the extent to which *all* the aspects of contemporary existence are interconnected to form a mighty and seamless hegemony, and it accomplishes this largely through its examination of what surfaces mean and how they facilitate the establishment of meaning. Characters such as Begbie and Sick Boy, for instance, are considered less socially disruptive than Spud and Renton despite the fact that they routinely behave in a way that explicitly violates many of our culture's legally codified values. Although they are clearly more dangerous criminals than their junky partners in crime, they are viewed as less deviant because they are better at *seeming* to embody the requisite values that are meant to be associated with someone such as them. Essentially, they are simply much better manipulators of signifiers (of manhood, heterosexuality, Scottishness, citizen) than their infinitely more harmless friends.

The importance of this connection being made is central to the novel's logic and, again, Welsh reveals its thematic centrality by repeatedly alluding to it throughout so as to force us to consider the hidden connections between the countless cultural symbols and practices which maintain and authorize hegemonic ideology. One particularly clever instance occurs when Renton is reminiscing about his relationship with his brother, who is repeatedly discussed in terms of his extreme popularity, a direct consequence of his ability to adopt a socially validated role. Billy's death is considered a tragedy far in excess of anything Renton could hope for at his own funeral because of the kind of man he was: a morally and religiously upright, athletic, patriotic, newlywed husband and expectant father who was murdered in the line of duty, defending his country. However, Renton remembers him as something of a sadist and one who was always keenly aware

of the power of symbolic assertions of force. When Renton was a boy and had to share a room with Billy, if the older brother brought a girl home, Renton was routinely banished with his “Subbuteo²⁵ into the lobby. Ah particularly recall the needless crunching of one Liverpool and two Sheffield Wednesday players under your heel. Unnecessary, but then total domination requires its symbolism, eh no Billy Boy?” (212) Welsh’s use of the inherently symbolic and fragile Subbuteo figures in order to metaphorically reveal Billy’s instinctive awareness of the value of symbolic gestures, however seemingly hollow, shows the extent to which this knowledge about the operation of power is a form of power in and of itself. Necessary to the process of developing and maintaining a hegemony is the idea that actually exerting direct pressure in order to subjugate is far less effective than constructing a system of signs that suggest that the subjugation is both natural and unavoidable in the first place. Therefore, symbolic gestures such as the appearance of dominance are effectively inseparable from their actual counterparts.

The importance of signifiers is reiterated in the subsequent “Exile” section, when Renton heads to London and finds that one of the pubs that he used to frequent has been gentrified, turned into a “soulless toilet” (229) and that the former regulars have all but been displaced by indistinguishable yuppies. The bartender at this “frighteningly sanitized hole” (229) recognizes Renton from prior visits, and explains to him the nature of his new clientele:

— Fing is Jock, most orf them geezers ain’t even genuine yuppies, he disdainfully gestures over to a crowd of suits in the corner. — Mostly fucking shiny-arsed clerks or commission-based insurance salesmen that get a handful orf fucking roice each week in wages. It’s orl fuckin image,

²⁵ Subbuteo is a very popular indoor miniature football game in Great Britain. To play, a piece of green felt is used as a simulacrum of a soccer field, and tiny (and very delicate) miniature players, painted to resemble members of a specific team, are flicked at a tiny ball in the hopes of scoring a goal.

innit. These cahnts are all up to their fucking eyes in debt. Strutting around the fucking city in expensive suits pretendin that they're on fifty K a year. Most orf them aint even got a five-figure salary, ave they.

Thir was a lot in what the guy said, bitter as the cunt wis. Thir wis certainly mair dosh kickin about down here thin up the road, but one thing the cunts doon here hud swallayed, wis the idea thit aw ye hud tae dae wis tae look the part, n it wid aw come your way, which wis fuckin shite. Ah've known scheme junkies in Edinburgh wi a healthier asset-tae-debt ratio thin some two-waged, heavily-mortgaged couples doon here. It'll hit the fan one day. Thir are sackloads ay repossession orders in the post. (Welsh 229-230)

Although he once more aligns the worlds of drugs with that of conventional culture, Renton's response seems at least a shade naïve in this passage by comparison to his typical tone of worldly cynicism. This is not to suggest that what he says is wrong. The argument could certainly be made that our present economic system is, because of late-capitalism's reliance on images and speculation rather than on anything so crude as the exchange of actual commodities, something of a house of cards that is growing at dangerously unsustainable levels. However, Renton's (and the bartender's) insistence on maintaining a too rigid distinction between 'real' yuppies and the imposters in the pub suggests that they may be a little less in touch with the rules of the game than the targets of their critique, who understand the meaning of surfaces.

Critical responses to *Trainspotting* have generally acknowledged that it is a work with a political component but have typically compartmentalized that aspect of the text, often suggesting that it is no more than a part of the social landscape within which the film occurs and in doing so have downplayed its significance.²⁶ In this kind of reading,

²⁶ Those who acknowledged that the film had an element of cultural critique felt its importance was secondary (as scenery), as was the case with *Sight and Sound* reviewer Andrew O' Hagan who observed that "Though it is angry, it is not an overtly political movie either – but by virtue of the language and the lives it uncovers, it might be seen to have political ramifications. You seldom see these people on film, or hear this language,

Trainspotting's ideological position becomes little more than scenery, reducing the critique it offers to little more than the outraged rant of an angry young man. In some ways, this kind of reading seems motivated by a failure to consider the changes made between the film and the novel. As I have suggested, the more persistent socio-economic commentary disseminated throughout Welsh's text is sharpened and amplified in the film, which through its focus on the 'choose life/choose not to choose life' dichotomy adopts a much more fully expressed and provocative ideological stance that far exceeds simple gritty 'realism'. The extent to which this crucial restructuring has not been fully explored is evident from the kinds of films with which *Trainspotting* is most frequently aligned for purposes of analysis. Despite the most obvious comparisons to *Twin Town*,²⁷ (which is little more than a mindless and wholly superficial imitation of its predecessor, and one seemingly made only to capitalize on its popularity) in the most politically engaged readings of the film, *Trainspotting* tends to be understood as part of a recent trend that includes *The Full Monty* and *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996). The rationale for drawing this comparison reveals the way in which the film has been depoliticized, since it surely bears little resemblance to either of these comedies bar their Britishness,

and this in itself harbours a political message" (O' Hagan 7). Other critics felt the film's politics were localized in its few overtly political speeches (largely by virtue of the narrow definition of politics on which their analyses are predicated). *Film Comment* reviewer Harlan Kennedy suggests that "Only once in the movie is a larger political perspective made explicit" (Kennedy 32), alluding to Renton's well-known speech about the embarrassing Scottish predicament of being "colonized by wankers," a view that is echoed by Fiona Oliver in "The Self-Debasement of Scotland's Postcolonial Bodies".

²⁷ *Twin Town* was clearly made and marketed with an eye to becoming the Welsh *Trainspotting*, but entirely failed to duplicate any of the (financial or artistic) success of its predecessor. It tells the story of two dim-witted young Welsh brothers whose lives are organized around enthusiastic drug use and various acts of mischief and criminality. Although at the most basic level it covers similar terrain to *Trainspotting*, it is marked by a complete lack of that film's cinematic creativity, intelligence, or subversive edge.

their international popularity, their ostensibly working class concerns²⁸ and their humor. In “Underbelly UK: The 1990s underclass film, masculinity and the ideologies of ‘new’ Britain,” Claire Monk argues that all three of these films are indicative of an alarming trend. She groups the works together as ‘underclass’ films dealing with an alleged (class inflected) crisis of masculinity which ultimately reverts to valorizing individuality and free enterprise in a way that entirely undermines any subversive political ambitions they may initially seem to display. Each film, then, seems to have been celebrated for their (however superficial) critique of the conditions associated with (non)working class culture but which in the final analysis come up short of offering a solution other than to have their characters assume the values of the capitalist system which is responsible for their oppression in the first place. Although *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* were widely praised for their ‘realistic’ setting and humane consideration for the problems of refreshingly ‘real’ people, Monk correctly points out that the narrative conventionality and often reactionary logic (especially in their closures) of these two films problematizes their ostensibly political content.

However, her argument is considerably less persuasive when applied to *Trainspotting*, a film whose ending is (like *Fight Club*’s) nonsensical unless read

²⁸ It is worth noting that *Trainspotting* is not properly concerned with the working class, since none of its principal characters are actually involved in the working world in the conventional sense. In Welsh’s novel, this is less true, and the hardships involved with participation in the labour force are at least represented (I am thinking here of the Tyler Durden-like antics of Kelly the waitress, who taints the food of the patrons who taunt her with an impressively broad array of bodily fluids). However, the film curiously almost totally omits scenes dealing with employment, such as Renton’s discussions of jobs he has formerly held. The only deviations from this pattern are Spud’s comic, speed-fueled job interview (during which his goal is precisely *not* to get a job) and some brief shots of Renton in London where we know he is temporarily employed as a real estate agent, but which is of only incidental significance.

ironically and in connection with the logic that dictates rest of the film. Only a very selective and blinkered view of the film can produce so tenuous an interpretation as this:

Despite *Trainspotting*'s caustic opening denouncement of 'straight' (implicitly, capitalist and consumerist) society, it should not be forgotten that the film concludes with Renton (now a London estate agent) and his old associates Spud (Ewen Bremner) and Begbie (Robert Carlyle) making \$16,000 on a heroin deal. Although the film's treatment of this reversal is loaded with irony, it addresses a generation of 'Thatcher's children' for whom the conflation of subcultural dissent and entrepreneurial capitalism holds no contradictions.

Whatever the fictional future holds for the characters of *Trainspotting* and *The Full Monty*, the films' denouements at least suggest that the psychological and emotional barriers to business success have been overcome.... The stance of *Trainspotting* and *Twin Town* is more cynically individualistic; even so, they suggest that the underclass, far from being victims, are fledgling entrepreneurs in an admittedly amoral free market where the fittest survive to make their own luck.

The political implications of these narratives of underclass enterprise are more than a little dubious.... In a triumph of capitalist competitive instincts over collective loyalty, *Trainspotting* ends with Renton deciding to keep most of the proceeds for himself and fleeing abroad. Just as the film had earlier equated membership of a heroin subculture with conscious social dissent, so its conclusion implies that leaving the underclass is simply a matter of exercising free choice. (Monk 285)

Needless to say, this a supremely problematic interpretation of *Trainspotting*'s overall effect and one which has very real consequences.²⁹ Monk's claim that the film's "project is also symptomatic of the drift away from social analysis, commitment or action which typified the 1990s" suggests a level of cynical disengagement that would be worrying were it not so patently untrue.

At the most superficial level Monk's reading is problematic because, even accounting for the irony she acknowledges is present in the film's dying moments, we are

²⁹ It is, however, an unfortunately familiar style of argument. The criticism of *Fight Club*, as we have seen, has leaned dangerously in this direction. Numerous reviewers inexplicably read the highly satiric romantic image of Jack and Marla holding hands

not at all sure precisely what Renton has decided to do. Certainly, she fails to recognize the extent to which *Trainspotting*'s meaning is generated by a polarizing view of society in which each character either embodies the values of their culture or does not to varying degrees. Although Renton explicitly tells us that he will be turning his back on the heroin-oriented subculture and throwing himself headfirst into the world of consumer capitalism and bourgeois values so as to be more like the "us" to which the film is addressed, this neat denouement is complicated on several fronts. First, the film's sympathies clearly still lie with the aforementioned subculture, now embodied only by Spud. The at times almost appealing menace of Begbie and sleazy narcissism of Sick Boy become more fully pathologized as the film winds down and after they successfully conclude the heroin deal each character is stripped of any of the manic charms they may previously have held. Begbie's violence is depicted in a less cartoonish light in the film's final bar fight during which he cuts Spud with a knife and seems ready to direct his wrath toward Renton. Sick Boy's selfishness is also painted now less as an amusing expression of youthful charm and more as a reflection of an unattractive absence of any feeling for his friends. Spud, however, seems both more desperate and more sympathetic by virtue of his having seemingly hit rock bottom and genuinely needing the money from the deal in order to survive and maintain his habit. Given this gradual shift in our perception of the principal characters, Renton's decision to steal from his friends cannot be read in the simplistic terms outlined by Monk and others who read *Trainspotting*'s closure as both simplistic and indicative of a selfishness which can be associated with capitalism.

during the film's apocalyptic ending as a reversion to reactionary action/romance movie logic, which entirely undermined the film's earlier subversive elements.

The film's conclusion is a more complex affair than it initially appears, precisely because of the challenge it poses to the ideological position it establishes at its inception and carefully modulates throughout. If we are to take him at his word, Renton certainly seems to choose life. Although he functions as our window (and a window very much reflective of the heroin addict's special perception of reality) into the alternative world he initially selects, I would suggest that his outlook and the broader politics of the film diverge at its close. One of the ways this is made apparent is through the changed presentations of the main characters in the closing segment, one that cements our allegiances to subcultural characters such as Sick Boy while further vilifying those who exemplify conventional values. Monk fails to recognize the extent to which these characters serve this symbolic function and in doing so critiques the film for depicting a relationship it never establishes in the first place. Although perhaps by many people's standards Begbie and Sick Boy are members of the same "underclass" as their heroin-addicted friends, this is not the position the film adopts. Renton's only betrayal is of those that are associated with the culture he has set himself against, precisely that world he ultimately and paradoxically professes to wish to join. *Trainspotting's* division is not simply one of class (although it is inflected by class) and defined exclusively by poverty but of all those values and practices which are associated by either an acceptance or rejection of hegemonic ideology. Furthermore, even Renton seems destined to become the object of audience contempt because of (what is, regardless, at bottom) his betrayal of his friends and only retains his sympathetic hold on the viewer because he leaves Spud his share of the drug money. That we could so nearly denounce our charming narrator for this reason implies that, although Renton may be conflicted about his allegiances to one

way of life over another, our sympathies are firmly rooted with the decision not to choose life.

Monk's appraisal of the film's conclusion is revealingly problematic in at least two other ways. First, because she somewhat dubiously downplays the extent to which (because of the specific narrative circumstances that the film presents) leaving the "underclass" as she narrowly defines it actually *is* "simply a matter of exercising free choice" (285). And, second, because although she fleetingly acknowledges that the film's final "reversal is loaded with irony," (285) she does not deem it necessary to examine how this might actually affect what *Trainspotting* means, or the way in which it can be interpreted. The former of these problems stems from Monk's unexamined assumption that because Mark Renton is able to choose to leave an underclass she defines exclusively as a financial state of being which can be rectified simply by a large infusion of cash, then the film suggests that this is always the case. Even if we are able to look past the narrowness with which she defines class oppression as an exclusively economic predicament, her position is untenable because this is not the position the film has adopted. If all that is required to leave the underclass is a few thousand dollars, then (contrary to what Monk extends this argument to mean) anyone *can* do so, or at least has precisely the same degree of opportunity to do so as Renton does. As she suggests, it is "simply a matter of exercising free choice" but only if one is prepared to steal or commit other profitable crimes. Although she goes on to predictably identify Renton's theft as "a triumph of capitalist competitive instincts over collective loyalty," (285) only a very selective and blinkered viewing of the film supports such a spurious interpretation of the way it articulates the potentialities of the late-capitalist subject.

The decision to critically disregard the irony of the final speech and its relationship to its earlier appearance is more troubling, though, since it points to a fundamental misrecognition of the way in which *Trainspotting* formulates its critique. The film's ending is, as I have suggested, intriguing because of a seeming breach between its ideological stance and the position assumed by the narrator. Another way this rift is made apparent, although more subtly, is simply by the unusual repetition of the all-important speech amid seemingly new circumstances. If, as the film suggests, hegemonic systems of oppression are able to function by virtue of their ability to conceal intrinsic connections between broad socio-economic structures and seemingly non-ideological attitudes, habits, and even objects, then the very fact of this defamiliarization being re-articulated, even in an apparently positive light, is indicative of a subversively critical political stance. Far from being the ideological retraction or containment of dissent that some commentators have tried to make the ironic finale of *Trainspotting* into, it is both a reaffirmation of the film's defamiliarizing politics (whose ultimate aim is to expose the ways in which power circulates through and is maintained by our culture), and an all too rare reminder that life as it is lived is always a choice (even when it least seems so) and one which can therefore be rejected in lieu of other ways of being.

Renton's Exile: *Trainspotting* as a Theoretical Fiction

Because of their structural and ideological centrality, Renton's lists of seemingly apolitical expressions of 'life' (luggage, good health, DIY and so forth) ought to be read within the context of similar arguments made by various theorists whose aim was also to expand our understanding of what constituted meaningful 'culture' so as to demonstrate

the ways in which culture is made to mean. In this regard, *Trainspotting* falls neatly within the parameters of what Joan Hawkins has termed ‘theoretical fictions’, or art that enacts or interrogates works of theory. Particularly because it is so central to the film’s subversive commentary on the pitfalls of a life arranged around consumer capitalism, it is perhaps not altogether surprising that Renton’s memorable speech contains echoes of other works with a similar focus and perspective. In the useful albeit brief history of the development of the field of cultural studies (entitled “From Culture to Hegemony”) which precedes his study of punk as a subculture, Dick Hebdige references several seminal works that spiral around the idea that the object of cultural inquiry must be broadened in order to incorporate precisely those elements that seem non-ideological. T.S. Eliot, for instance, defines culture (as a thing to be studied) in a way that suggested this type of ideological dispersal:

all the characteristic activities and interests of a people. Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the 12th of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart-board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, 19th Century Gothic churches, the music of Elgar... (Eliot, in Hebdige 7)

This connection between seemingly innocuous elements of everyday life and broader relations of cultural power is taken to its logical conclusion by Roland Barthes. In *Mythologies*, where he brilliantly applies the insights of semiology to his developing theory of mass culture, Barthes aim is to show how the entire ideology of any given society is established through and present in each of its smallest constituent parts. In a way that is, again, more than incidentally connected to Renton’s similar list, he persuasively argues:

The whole of France is steeped in this anonymous ideology: our press, our films, our theatre, our pulp literature, our rituals, our Justice, our

diplomacy, our conversations, our remarks about the weather, a murder trial, a touching wedding, the cooking we dream of, the garments we wear, everything, in everyday life, is dependent on the representation which the bourgeoisie *has and makes us have* of the relations between man and the world. (Barthes 140)

Hebdige recognizes that this view of culture exceeds the scholarly realm and has previously appeared in works of art, noting that “Academics who adopt a semiotic approach are not alone in reading significance into the loaded surfaces of life...Jean Genet, the archetype of the ‘unnatural’ deviant, again exemplifies the practice of resistance” (Hebdige 18). Comparing Genet’s work to Barthes’, he adds that the former is “as convinced in his own way as is Roland Barthes of the ideological character of cultural signs. He is equally oppressed by the seamless web of forms and meanings which encloses and yet excludes him”(18). Just as Renton’s speech seems undeniably linguistically and ideologically linked to the famous passages from Eliot and Barthes, so too does it seem to resonate with the influence of Genet, that other famed “‘unnatural’ deviant” who also found the pervasiveness of hegemonic ideology a thing of startling and unbearable horror. Although Renton at least seems to choose to end his self-imposed exile and re-enter the fold of contemporary life, the film itself seems to lag behind and remain in the alternative world it has established. In doing so, in choosing to maintain the manner of its critique, the viewer is left in the dark to wonder, with Genet, about how best to reckon with the spectacular and elusive system that has always been assembled around and *within* them:

I was astounded by so rigorous an edifice whose details were united against me. Nothing in this world is irrelevant: the stars on a general’s sleeve, the stock-market quotations, the olive harvest, the style of the judiciary, the wheat exchange, the flower-beds, ...Nothing. This order ...had a meaning – my exile. (Genet, in Hebdige 18)

Chapter Four

Reconsidering *The Idiots*: Can Dogme95 Fix Contemporary Film (and Culture)?

Art is not a mirror to reflect reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.

-Bertolt Brecht

Sheds are bourgeois crap.

- Stoffer, *The Idiots*

Using Lars von Trier's controversial *The Idiots* as a starting point, I intend to examine the compelling ways in which the infamous Dogme95 manifesto aims to address and correct the ruinous excess of contemporary film (/) culture. *The Idiots* is a remarkable and provocative materialist critique of modern culture in its own right, but its meaning is significantly complicated by its centrality to the celebrated output of the Dogme95 'movement'. It received virtually none of the critical acclaim, financial success, or festival awards garnered by the other major Dogme films (such as *Mifune* or *The Celebration*) and was widely regarded as a disturbing and tasteless failure even by those who admired von Trier's more accessible outings [*Breaking the Waves* (1996) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), for instance]. However, precisely because of its many imperfections and discomforting subject matter, *The Idiots* may be the most fully developed and compelling expression of Dogme ideology. I shall suggest that the meaningfully artless form and content of *The Idiots* are intertwined in particularly unique and revolutionary ways, enabling the film to critique contemporary film and contemporary culture. The dual target of this assault is precisely what I think has been either overlooked or is insufficiently developed in existing accounts of the film, and I

hope to demonstrate the extent to which *The Idiots* is only really comprehensible when viewed in light of its counter-hegemonic aspirations.

As a finished product, *The Idiots* is an uneasy synthesis that attempts to locate an elusive sense of the ‘real’ in our late capitalist (film) culture, one in which the “spassing” (or faking mental disability) on the part of the film’s characters is ideologically reflected by the seemingly amateurish precepts of its construction. In this respect, *The Idiots* is unlike the other Dogme films. Although these works all tend to be technically quite oppositional or at least adventurous, they nevertheless maintain a rigid split between form and content and therefore offer very little sustained political critique of the ideology of mainstream society or cinema.

My argument is that *The Idiots* is the only recent counter-hegemonic film work that is demonstrably radical both in its form and its content and, moreover, in its playful deconstruction of these categories. An examination of this film and of the debates it is intimately involved in will hopefully make it abundantly clear that a reconsideration of this challenging film is necessary if we are to imagine a different kind of cinema.

Furthermore, in ways that are by no means immediately clear, it may even help us imagine a different way of being in our culture. I will begin with a consideration of how the disruptive activity of “spassing” is a self-reflexive allusion to the technical prescriptions of “The Vow of Chastity” which each Dogme film must adhere to. Far from *only* being a ridiculous and meaningless slap in the face of our too genteel (film) culture, I would suggest that “spassing” as formulated by von Trier ought to *also* be read as a thoughtful and substantial attempt to address the precarious situation of the subject amid what Guy Debord famously termed the society of the spectacle. Furthermore, I shall

use *The Idiots* as a test case in order to consider precisely how the Dogme95 movement aims to make corrections to both contemporary film and, perhaps, ultimately (and necessarily) even the culture that produces them. If it accomplishes this, it does so obliquely; however, it is a leap that I think can be made if we can accept that, when considered as a totality, *The Idiots* asks to be read as an example of what art (and the subject) can and cannot achieve today, what their potentials and limitations are, and what the cultural implications of this might be.

Dogme95¹

Before I turn to my analysis, I must first give a brief explanation of precisely what the Dogme95 movement is, what it aims to do, and how it aims to do it. Despite the fact that the administrative department of the group has been recently dismantled in favour of an entirely informal certification process, it seems to me premature to speak in the past tense. But first we must look to the more optimistic nascency of the movement, before any consideration of its ending(s).

In Copenhagen, on Monday, March 13, 1995, celebrated and mercurial Danish director Lars von Trier summoned promising up-and-comer Thomas Vinterberg to his home where together they wrote a short critique of contemporary film and a set of ten therapeutic rules that Dogme filmmakers must work within. The two men formed a brotherhood and proceeded to recruit new members primarily from within the close-knit and well-funded Danish film community. Søren Kragh-Jacobsen and Kristian Levring were the first to sign on, followed by documentarian Anne Wivel who quit the group

¹ The Danish spelling of the word is 'Dogme'; I shall use this spelling throughout rather than the English translation 'Dogma'.

almost immediately. As we will see, this national insularity entirely collapsed with the enormous interest in all things Dogme95 following the release of *The Celebration* and, to a far lesser extent, *The Idiots* at the Cannes film festival in 1998. The four founding members of the brotherhood (each of whom has directed only one ‘official’ Dogme film) began encouraging directors of every nation and skill level to make at least one Dogme film to supplement their own output. Word of the movement quickly spread and a host of international Dogme films did get (and continue to be) made. Each of these films had to be submitted for approval to the brethren to see how close they came to obeying all the rules in the manifesto who then provided Dogme certification to those that did. A Dogme95 website was set up with technical and contact information, message boards for online discussions, and some explanatory material about all the approved films to date.²

The film world was informed about this impending new wave with a rapidity that speaks volumes about von Trier’s sense of urgency, not to mention his infamous genius for self-promotion. On March 18th the Danish paper *Politiken* ran a headline declaring “Lars von Trier goes into Artistic Cloister – The Director Will Start a New Wave With Chaste and Naked Films” (Stevenson 102). On March 20th, von Trier was in Paris sitting on a panel discussing (conveniently) the future of European cinema and clearly recognized the potential propagandistic value of such a venue. He waited until it was his turn to speak, “asked permission to depart from the agenda and then stood up and announced to his esteemed colleagues and the audience that he represented the group Dogme 95. He proceeded to read the group’s manifesto and threw a handful of red leaflets containing the text off the stage, after which he promptly departed the theater”

² As of June 2002, when the Dogme brethren stopped formally reviewing films for the purpose of certification, thirty-three films from all over the globe had been approved. For

(102). Although it was not until the release of the inaugural Dogme films at Cannes in 1998 that the movement became a *bona fide* film world phenomenon, von Trier and Vinterberg's initial declaration of war has been ground zero for all debates about the strengths and weaknesses of what was meant to be another New Wave. Both directors have confessed that, although they take the movement they have founded very seriously, the manifesto itself was written "after having drunk several bottles of wine and amid bursts of heavy laughter." The document that would go on to cause such mighty and divisive ripples in debates about contemporary film reads as follows:

The Dogme95 Manifesto

Dogme95...is a collective of film directors founded in Copenhagen in spring 1995.

Dogme95 has the expressed goal of countering 'certain tendencies' in the cinema today.

Dogme95 is a rescue action!

In 1960 enough was enough! The movie was dead and called for resurrection. The goal was correct but the means were not! The new wave proved to be a ripple that washed ashore and turned to muck.

Slogans of individualism and freedom created works for a while, but no changes. The wave was up for grabs, like the directors themselves. The wave was never stronger than the men behind it. The anti-bourgeois cinema itself became bourgeois, because the foundations upon which its theories were based was the bourgeois perception of art. The *auteur* concept was bourgeois romanticism from the very start and thereby...false!

information about these films, see the Dogme website (www.dogme95.dk).

To Dogme95 cinema is not individual!

Today a technological storm is raging, the result of which will be the ultimate democratization of the cinema. For the first time, anyone can make movies. But the more accessible the media becomes, the more important the avant-garde. It is no accident that the phrase 'avant-garde' has military connotations. Discipline is the answer...we must put our films into uniform, because the individual film will be decadent by definition!

Dogme95 counters the individual film by the principle of presenting an indisputable set of rules known as THE VOW AS CHASTITY.

In 1960 enough was enough! The movie has been cosmeticized to death, they said; yet since then the use of cosmetics has exploded.

The 'supreme' task of the decadent film-makers is to fool the audience. Is that what we are so proud of? Is that what the '100 years' have brought us? Illusions via which emotions can be communicated?...By the individual artist's free choice of trickery?

Predictability (dramaturgy) has become the golden calf around which we dance. Having the characters' inner lives justify the plot is too complicated, and not 'high art'. As never before, the superficial action and the superficial movie are receiving all the praise.

The result is barren. An illusion of pathos and an illusion of love.

To Dogme95 the movie is not illusion!

Today a technological storm is raising of which the result is the elevation of cosmetics to God. By using new technology anyone at any time can wash the

last grains of truth away in the deadly embrace of sensation. The illusions are everything the movie can hide behind.

Dogme95 counters the film of illusion by the presentation of an indisputable set of rules known as THE VOW OF CHASTITY.

'I swear to submit to the following set of rules drawn up and confirmed by Dogme95:

1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).
2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images, or vice versa.
(Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot.)
3. The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place.)
4. The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera.)
5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.
6. The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)
7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)

8. Genre movies are not acceptable.
9. The film format must be Academy 35mm.
10. The director must not be credited.

Furthermore, I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste! I am no longer an artist. I swear to refrain from creating a “work”, as I regard the instant as more important than the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations.³

Thus I make my VOW OF CHASTITY.’

Copenhagen, Monday, 13 March 1995

On behalf of Dogme95

Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg

Now, there is nothing particularly extraordinary about this missive, one that a characteristically controversial Lars von Trier later flung from a balcony at the Cannes film festival: these drunken Danes are by no means the only critics to have smelled something rotten in the state of Hollywood. It has been a historically popular chorus, and the relationship between Dogme95 and various other influential movements in the history of film will be discussed presently. (Most obvious, of course, is the French New Wave which is clearly an enormous formative influence – even down to telling similarities in

³ It is surely the case that only *The Idiots* fulfills this last clause, given its spectacular bad taste and shoddy aesthetics. Indeed, this can (and has been) reasonably be said of many of the demands made in the manifesto.

the wordings of their respective manifestos).⁴ The increasingly global domination of US blockbusters which are invariably “Fat, foolish, ruinously expensive and ideologically hateful” (Kelly 2) is so troubling and universally decried that it is now virtually taken for granted (and therefore conveniently dismissed) by even the most critically disengaged filmgoers.

Von Trier himself has actually issued several prior manifestos attacking various elements of the contemporary film world. However, what distinguishes this document from others like it (other than the amount of analysis it attracted by comparison) is that Vinterberg and von Trier’s vow of chastity overtly claims to contain the remedy for all that ails the body of contemporary film. The key detail here is that the proposed remedy implicitly suggests that in order to affect any real change a significant transformation both of form and of content is required as well as a rethinking of how the former might participate in the latter.

Although, as we have seen, von Trier was not the sole creator of the manifesto, its specific restrictions seem particularly inspired by his work, which has been marked by a movement away from the celebrated technical wizardry of his highly stylized early films [*The Element of Crime* (1984), *Europa* (1991)] to the more basic, hand held digital

⁴ Richard Kelly’s lively *The Name of this Book is Dogme95* examines this connection at greater length, recognizing links between, for instance, Dogme’s “expressed goal of countering ‘certain tendencies’ in the cinema today” and Francois Truffaut’s “Une certaine tendance du cinema francais” from *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1958. He concludes that “if I held this Manifesto up to the light, I would clearly discern the shadow of Godard, smoking a small cigar and chuckling. Lacing between every line was a red thread, linking these Rules to Godard’s pronouncements and actions across four decades” (Kelly 10).

aesthetic of his recent output.⁵ Essentially, even though *The Idiots* is his only official Dogme movie, each of his last five films (tellingly, all of those dealing with disability) are Dogme influenced, suggesting that *The Vow of Chastity* came about because of positive experiences with the less constructed works such as *Breaking the Waves*. This is a trend in his oeuvre that shows little signs of abating. Although by no means a Dogme film, *Dancer in the Dark* comes about as close as a musical could come to achieving certification, given its unusual reliance on hand-held digital cameras. Similarly, von Trier's latest film utilizes an even more pared down approach than that found in any of his work to date.⁶ The film is an 'experimental psychological drama' that is set "in an American Rocky Mountain village in the 1930s, yet filmed entirely in an empty studio with just a few props, *Dogville* [may] be von Trier's most technically innovative film to date. Locations like a prison, a factory, and so on [are] indicated by chalk marks on a black floor. The suspenseful atmosphere [is] created almost entirely by the interplay between light and shadow....A DFI publicity booklet published in January 2002 declared that von Trier's new concept is intended to reconstruct the entire known language of the cinema" (Stevenson 185). Far from shying away from aesthetic riskiness which would have been quite natural following the criticism directed at *The Idiots*, it seems he is focussing even more intently on those tendencies that first became apparent in *Breaking the Waves*. The rules, then, appear to reflect in particular von Trier's ongoing experiments of in technical minimalism. Far from being arbitrary (or even democratic for that matter) the manifesto certainly seems designed to force him to make the kind of

⁵ For a fuller analysis of the integral part of the Dogme95 movement in general and Lars von Trier in particular in the ongoing digital revolution (if it is that), see Shari Roman's fragmented and useful *Digital Babylon: Hollywood, Indiewood & Dogme 95*.

films he was already interested in making, only moreso, and this is very much the case with *The Idiots*.

The appeal of *The Celebration* and *Mifune* is generated in no small part by their directors' ability to create images of rare beauty by contrasting (respectively) elegance and rusticity with the electronic graininess created by palm-held digital cameras. Both are striking looking films that demonstrate quite wonderfully the impressive range of tones and textures that can be produced under the austere auspices of Dogme95. Certainly, both films look unconventional, but in both cases the overall impression is of a novel technical experiment than it is redolent of carelessness or (worse still in these bottom-line obsessed times) of a desperately low budget. Indeed, the notion of finding beauty in unexpected places (or by unexpected means) is one so wholeheartedly beloved in the contemporary independent film world that the distinct and novel aesthetic of Dogme paradoxically almost makes it easier to create a visually engaging film. Regardless of why this fascination exists, it seems clear that both *Mifune* and *The Celebration* profited from it, as did audiences who were able to bask in the textured electronic graininess of the films while being terribly impressed at the complex beauty that can be captured by a camera small enough to fit into the palm of your hand.

Not so *The Idiots*, which looks cheap and nasty. Without question, it is aesthetically the most ragged (the most Dogme-*looking*) of all the Dogme films, and not necessarily in a good way. Its aesthetic seems more the product of a rushed and haphazard construction (it was written in four days and filmed in just over two months) than of any appealingly daring formal risks. *The Idiots* is so pared down as to seem

⁶ At the time of writing, *Dogville* had yet to be released in North America so I am relying here on the reports of those who have seen and written about the film.

artless and, at times, just plain sloppy. On several occasions we can actually see the cameraman within the frame, something that is not justified by the film's inconsistent premise that the spassers are the focus of a documentary, one that is apparently supposed to be filmed after the fact. We can clearly see the camera during scenes that are evidently supposed to be 'off camera' and even the destabilizing effect of von Trier's hand held camera work also never lets us forget that we are watching an illusion that has been created. This jarring aesthetic is entirely the result of the Dogme rules, which can not help but to create a film that looks this way if fully applied during production. However, it is the redemptive value of the manifesto rather than its striking visuals that concerns von Trier, who is forced to make a film that must be interesting for reasons other than its gorgeous surfaces. By again shifting emphasis from the product to the process, he has made a film that is about the redemptive value of giving up control, of daring to fail and looking foolish when doing so. It is about allowing oneself the freedom to be careless, to not care, which is quietly recognized as one of our culture's greatest taboos.⁷ In *The Idiots* we see a director considering very carefully both the themes that have previously obsessed him and the way in which he is currently working.

While much has been made about the extent to which these rules have been (and, indeed, even can be) adhered to by Dogme directors, I think it is more important to focus on what the films that this movement has generated have accomplished within the confines of this controversial framework. Reviews of these films tend to (rather pointlessly, considering that the director's must make their own confession) direct our

⁷ By interrogating his own subjectivity in this way, von Trier's transgressions recall those of the characters in all three of the subversive defamiliarisations I discuss.

attention to deviations made from the rules, and they often contain a smug declaration that a 'pure' Dogme film could not really be made, as if that meant anything.

To date, the three most important and widely released films bearing the Dogme stamp of approval are *The Celebration*, *The Idiots*, and *Mifune*. Kristian Levring's impressive re-visionary 'adaptation' of King Lear, *The King is Alive*, received virtually no exposure in North America despite its cast of recognizable international actors (such as Jennifer Jason-Leigh, Bruce Davison and Janet McTeer). The story of a busload of tourists stranded in the African desert who stage an amateur production of Shakespeare's play while struggling to survive and come to terms with the growing possibility of their deaths, is enlivened by some dazzling digital images and intense performances. Although a very fine and original film in its own right, it is more or less similar from an ideological perspective to *Mifune* and *The Celebration*. This is also the case with the unsurprisingly popular *Italian for Beginners*, which was released more recently and which, although it is light-hearted fun in the same vein as *Mifune*, also has little to add to the debate. For now I will also set aside any sustained discussion of the other 'official' Dogme films (by which I mean those which were awarded certification either by the now defunct Dogme secretariat or via the new, looser 'honor' system).⁸

Dogme co-founder Thomas Vinterberg's *The Celebration* is generally considered to be the pinnacle of what can be created within the Vow of Chastity. The winner of

⁸ Although in general the Dogme films made outside of Denmark are strangely yet palpably far less interesting than those of Danish origin, some, such as *Interview* and Harmony Korine's memorable *Julien Donkey-boy* (1999) are worthy of serious analysis. I will also be unable to properly address those numerous works which, although clearly made with an eye to the manifesto's guiding principles [I am thinking here of such recent Cannes successes as *Humanité* (Bruno Dumonte, 1999) and particularly, *Rosetta* (Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne, 1999), not to mention Michael Winterbottom's

numerous major festival honours around the globe⁹ and the recipient of almost universal critical adoration, *The Celebration* is a demonstration of what an enforced focus on story and character can accomplish. It is the engrossing tale of a son returning to his childhood home to attend the lavish sixtieth birthday party of his father. When making a toast before the large gathering of his family and friends, he reveals that the reason his sister has recently taken her own life is that their beloved and well-respected father repeatedly raped them when they were children. As we might expect, this narrative bombshell makes for some intriguing conflict and the film is frequently compelling. However, although this plot twist (and, particularly, the fact that this revelation is, at least at first, virtually ignored) enables some particularized critique of the middle-class family unit and the bourgeois values with which it is associated, the film is *exceptional* only because of its Dogme-inspired aesthetic and technical excellence. The hand held camera-work, necessarily careful choice of location, and almost supernatural lighting effects lend a hypnotic and strangely elegant aura of grave intimacy to the proceedings. Although *The Celebration* is clearly critical of the character Michael's almost comically excessive displays of sexism and racism, as well as some more general signs of disdain for the way class divisions are rigidly defined and policed in the house, it is by no means an overtly politically-themed film. Its interests lie elsewhere.

Wonderland (1999) and Patrice Chereau's *Intimacy* (2001), have not sought out official certification.

⁹ Vinterberg's film won the prestigious Jury Prize at Cannes, 1998, where it was also nominated for the Palme D'or. In its native Denmark the following year it won an impressive seven awards at the Robert Festival. It was similarly well received in America, where it was nominated for a Golden Globe and voted Best Foreign Film at the Independent Spirit Awards, and by the New York and Los Angeles Film Critics Associations.

Søren Kragh-Jacobsen's award-winning¹⁰ and critically favoured *Mifune* is quite similar to *The Celebration* in that it is a very fine but not narratively adventurous piece of work significantly enlivened by its formal style. It speaks volumes about the impact that a Dogme-style visual can have on a film's critical reception that, against all conventional definitions of the term, *Mifune* was celebrated as a "dazzling post-modern screwball romance" (Morgenstern) in *The Wall Street Journal*. It is perhaps the most formulaic of all the Dogme films to date. Basically, it is a rather old-fashioned love story between an upwardly mobile urbanite returning to his family's farm after the death of his father and the comely prostitute he hires as a maid/ babysitter for his mentally disabled brother. Like Vinterberg's feature, it has a Dogme-inspired energy which helps to overcome its familiar narrative movements and clichéd characters (the goodly retard surfaces once more, so too the hooker with the heart of gold).

Like so many independent films, both *The Celebration* and *Mifune* are unconventional in a largely superficial way. This is not a slight against either work nor against politically unchallenging art in general. No-one is under any obligation to try and solve the world's woes, nor should they be. Indeed, if we temporarily disregard the manifesto that guided these films' construction, we would have no reason whatsoever to think that they ought to be ideologically oppositional or transgressive. Certainly their stories and themes do not necessitate an overtly critical stance. And von Trier himself, although arguably the most politically engaged of all the Dogme filmmakers, followed *The Idiots* with a film that belonged to that most 'stagy' and least socially engaged of genres: the melodramatic musical. However, I would suggest that the manifesto, if

¹⁰ *Mifune* was the recipient of many international honours, most notably at the Berlin International Film Festival where in 1999 it won three awards including the Silver Bear.

properly considered, *must* be read as a fundamentally political and subversive tract. This is the case in two interrelated ways, at least one of which has not wholly been understood either by Dogme critics (as we shall see), or perhaps even by the filmmakers themselves (including Vinterberg, who helped write the contentious document).

Re-politicizing Dogme95, Re-reading *The Idiots*

The common interpretation of the manifesto is that it is both a critique of a certain kind of film and an aid with which to force a willing director to make another, more ‘truthful’ kind. The manifesto definitely raises, and indeed is predicated upon, some intriguing (and arguably archaic) notions of what is ‘real’ and what is ‘fake’. Is its text not at least in part about the content of form, the inherence of ideology, the imbeddedness of meaning in the structures of what we take for reality? The specific rhetoric of the argument has a decidedly rebellious and counter-cultural undercurrent, with its sustained allusion to the radical socialist aspirations of Jean-Luc Godard and the French New Wave. Consider the language used in this paragraph, wherein the founding members bemoan the fact that the transience of their predecessors (amongst other important deficiencies) signaled their ultimate failure: “The anti-bourgeois cinema itself became bourgeois, because the foundations upon which its theories were based was the bourgeois perception of art. The auteur concept was bourgeois romanticism from the very start and thereby... false!”

In moments such as this, we are made aware of the connection which I consider absolutely central to a real comprehension of von Trier’s accomplishment with *The Idiots*: that is, the implicit connection in the manifesto linking form with content, technique with ideology, medium with message. The implications of this recognition on

the part of the brethren have not been fully examined by even their most sympathetic critics to date, but I feel such an analysis is the only way to access the logic of their argument. Furthermore, this fundamentally controversial aspect of the decree is only really explored in von Trier's film, and it is no coincidence that *The Idiots* was despised for reasons that I suspect are, at bottom, not aesthetic but ideological.

While it seems fairly self-evident that the manifesto aligns certain familiar techniques of film production with a certain familiar kind of film, the full implications of this line of thinking are apparently far less visible. A horrified critic of another text (Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*) that was widely hated for reasons less straightforward than they seemed, suggested (in an inadvertent moment of great insight) that "Mr Ellis's true offense is to imply that the human mind is so corrupt that it is no longer able to distinguish between form and content" (Lehmann-Haupt 18). This is precisely the dangerous equation that is at play in *The Idiots*. Once the structural basis of meaning (and the meaning of structural bases) is made explicit, it is not too great a theoretical leap to consider the inherence of social meaning in all the structures of our constructed culture.

This is precisely the core area of inquiry of what has come to be known as cultural studies. It is the task undertaken, for instance, by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* or in Walter Benjamin's *Arcade Project* (to name only two of many) where we find traces of hegemonic meaning in even the most seemingly insignificant units of our culture. The language of the manifesto shows this awareness of film's enormous ideological value in its repeated denunciation of 'bourgeois' film, and with its denigration of 'bourgeois romanticism' and 'the bourgeois perception of art'. Their adjectival repetition of this

Marxian term is both a sly nod to the manifesto's most explicit antecedent and, crucially, a sort of clue to gaining more substantial insights into its full meaning. The brethren here show themselves to be greater theorists than they have generally been given credit for. It is not solely out of *aesthetic* revulsion that they aim to make anti-bourgeois films, but is surely equally motivated by a recognition that the hegemony in whose interests such films operate is itself a thing to be challenged and changed. The bourgeois perception of art that the group blames for the production of bourgeois art is not a natural or inborn perspective, although it presents itself, and is generally discussed, in precisely those terms. Of course, a bourgeois perception of art is developed in no small part through a sustained immersion in and consumption of the ideological vehicle that is bourgeois art. We will recall that this seamless (and, therefore, unquestioned) and circular logic is exactly what enables hegemony to function. The brethren are correct in their belief that creating even a very small rupture can throw the entire system up for analysis, precisely by challenging its status as "nature" and revealing it as being even potentially a subject of analysis. The manifesto is surely, then, ultimately not only 'anti-bourgeois cinema' but also 'anti-bourgeois', and the films must be interpreted in these terms.

This is an absolutely vital distinction for my purposes, both in my analysis of *The Idiots* when compared to other Dogme films and when compared to the other recent subversive works I discuss elsewhere in this dissertation. Furthermore, it certainly suggests that the tameness of such efforts as *Mifune* and *The Celebration* raises important questions about how fully the spirit of the manifesto has been adhered to. Surely the manifesto must be about more than a straightforward modification of surfaces, a switching of aesthetics? Although the argument could be made that Dogme aims to do

away with making conventional films by doing away with the methods that make them conventional in the first place, is it not also only reasonable to assume that the works would have a more than purely technical interest in challenging (film) culture? If they are so interested in challenging the implicit or built-in ideology of cinema, must they not also make that apparent, by constructing radical narratives, for instance? Both *Mifune* and *The Celebration* fail entirely in this regard, and if they do throw down a challenge to the status quo, it is clearly one more directed at the sphere of film than at the culture that makes them and is in turn made by them.

“Making Fun”: the Critical Response to *The Idiots*

The specialists of the cinema said its revolutionary politics were bad; the politicians among all the left-wing illusionists said that it was bad cinema. But when one is at once a revolutionary and a film-maker, one may easily demonstrate that their general bitterness derives from the obvious fact that the film in question is the exact critique of society which they do not know how to combat; and a first example of the cinema which they do not know how to make.

- Guy Debord, responding to critics of his
The Society of the Spectacle (1973)

There are very few lovers of that movie.

- Peter Aalbaek Jensen (Producer, *The Idiots*)

The Idiots is refreshingly aggressive and forthright in its broad attack on contemporary culture. Its critique is necessarily wide, often leading to what could be perceived as a lack of focus. Possibly because the manner of critique adopted in *The Idiots* is arguably the most insightful and useful method of cultural analysis today, though, the breadth of von Trier's target (the unexamined politics of everyday life) is not an easy sell. *The Idiots* does not present a version of resistance (protest or petition) or an overtly unjust and

isolated target (for instance, sweatshops) that would be recognizable as such to a liberal audience. Accordingly, it is not the kind of film either critics or audiences are wont to like very easily in that it seems to break (and break gleefully, maddeningly) many of the silent contracts a film makes with its viewer. Since it is not easy to pin down as a cultural object, it was met on its Cannes debut with howls of derision and cries of outrage that never really died down as the film traveled around the world. The hostility of audience responses was in part compounded by inevitable comparisons with the far more conventional Dogme95 showcase, *The Celebration*, which debuted at the same festival under the considerable spotlight generated by the international publicity garnered by the manifesto. Although often discussed in tandem, it is by no means the case that a viewer who enjoyed Vinterberg's film would even be able to sit through von Trier's. *The Idiots* is all too clearly a very different kind of Dogme film and, without question, it is certainly also much less immediately appealing than von Trier's prior outings.

The controversial Dane with a penchant for mischief-making had been a Cannes favourite since the release of his technically audacious first feature *The Element of Crime* in 1984. His reputation as one of Europe's most promising young directors was enhanced with the subsequent success of the similarly accomplished *Europa*. His final pre-Dogme film, *Breaking the Waves*, became something of a global sensation and was even nominated for American Academy Awards (which it did not win). His growing stature in film world was almost completely undone in one fell swoop, particularly in America where *The Idiots*:

looked like a case of premeditated 'careericide', a confusing film that yielded up only one certainty: after this von Trier would never make movies in Hollywood. He had come to personify the industry's stereotype of the arrogant, self-absorbed European 'film-artist' who only made

movies for himself and didn't care a lick about the audience....
Annoyingly enough, von Trier had proved he *could* make big
hits. Apparently he just didn't care to. (Stevenson 127)

Although its' jarring hand-held camera work and rawness of emotion aligns
Breaking the Waves more with *The Idiots* than with the technical mastery and carefully
composed *mise en scene* associated with the Europa trilogy [*The Element of Crime*,
Epidemic (1988), *Europa*] that preceded it, it is clearly an upsetting deviation from what
was *expected* of von Trier as a director of promise.

It ought to be stressed here that this is something of an achievement in and of
itself, given the extent to which the reputation that von Trier would tarnish was precisely
for being erratic and volatile. *Breaking the Waves* is no gentle affair for the viewer, nor is
it a 'polite', restrained or orderly experience. On the contrary, its brilliance lies in the
fact that it is a relentlessly punishing ordeal that feels bruising to endure at times. The
film is the story of Bess (Emily Watson), a young woman who, at the request of her
paraplegic husband, repeatedly places herself in sexually dangerous positions where she
is agonizingly and graphically humiliated ad nauseam for metaphysical reasons that are
dubious at best. This premise is significantly complicated both by the film's highly
ambiguous use of religion and by the (related) fact that we are never wholly convinced of
the mental stability of either the newlywed Bess or her recently crippled husband.
Because of her desire to please her husband and to sacrifice herself for God, she allows
herself to be abused almost to death. Her increasingly dangerous submissions, endured at
the direct request of God in their frequent conversations (actually, with herself), seem
more and more to be irrefutable signs of madness rather than of genuine spiritual
commitment. At the end of the film, when there seems to be very little of Bess left, von

Trier certainly seems to definitively validate her self-destructive conduct by literally revealing the presence of god, thereby questioning everything we have thought about her thus far.¹¹ If von Trier's only intention was to shock his audience with escalating levels of emotional torture, then he would still have his work cut out for him after *Breaking the Waves*. However, even for the audiences at Cannes who are surely able to tolerate far more unconventional visions than the famously prudish and boorish multiplex moviegoer, *The Idiots* was considered to be beyond the pale. Although the global media attention paid to the manifesto led to the birth of Dogme95 being generally regarded as *the event of the festival*, *The Celebration* was the film cited as revealing the impressive potential of adherence to the manifesto. By contrast, *The Idiots* was written off as a lapse in form¹² (and good taste) from a director whose strange sensibilities and famous eccentricities had temporarily gotten the best of him.

Most mainstream media outlets (newspapers and magazines, network television shows) virtually rejected *The Idiots* wholesale as a monstrous freakshow, if they

¹¹ See Slavoj Žižek's "Death and the Maiden" for the most compelling reading of Bess's actions, as well as for a discussion of the seemingly incongruous relationship between the film's romantic content and Dogme form, a tension that exists even more sharply in *Dancer in the Dark*.

¹² A televised interview with von Trier on the Independent Film Channel contains one of the more humorously negative responses to the film. Having discussed at length (with clips and analysis) all of the director's prior features, interviewer Marc Gervais virtually completely ignores *The Idiots* other than to acknowledge its poor reception and proceeds to talk about the (then) forthcoming *Dancer in the Dark*. Memorably, Gervais is clearly stunned almost to the point of speechlessness when his subject suggests that, moreso than any of his more celebrated endeavors, *The Idiots* is the film wherein he feels he came closest to achieving his goals as a filmmaker. The interviewer's bewildered response to this statement is reflective of most responses to the film: "really!...*The Idiots*...oh my...could you explain that a little bit more...". Presumably all too familiar with this type of reaction, von Trier ends the interview with a good-humored promise that his next film "will be a little bit more accessible" and that "the very good news is...he's back on the right track".

acknowledged its existence at all.¹³ The popular rejection of the film is addressed by Jack Stevenson when suggesting (oddly, and ultimately unpersuasively) that it was too Danish for foreign viewers to understand, and I will use his succinct synopsis rather than quote from a long list of countless adverse reactions to the film. He notes that *The Idiots* “was a flop with the majority of critics and audiences in many foreign countries. Von Trier was regarded by some as something of a spoiled brat who was just seeing how much he could get away with, just breaking rules for the sake of breaking rules. He was a film-maker with an over-inflated reputation, wrote the *New York Press* reviewer, ‘who attempts to make fun of the fact that he doesn’t believe in anything’” (Stevenson 127). Worse still, A. O. Scott suggests in *The New York Times*, he treats the viewer badly by forcing them to endure a film “with nothing on its mind besides the squirming discomfort of its audience, the achievement of which it holds up as a brave political accomplishment” (Scott 2). Rather than dwell on these fairly superficial and unsophisticated critiques, I will instead consider those critics who are at least somewhat sympathetic to (or even aware of) the film’s ambitions even if they consider the final product a failure. While reluctantly expressing an appreciation for the boldness of von Trier’s vision (perhaps despite the “dubious shenanigans” of the spassers), *Sight and Sound* critic Xan Brooks concludes

¹³ Instances of critical neglect are curiously recurrent in Dogme95 scholarship, especially when addressing von Trier’s contribution. Consider, for instance, the inexplicable omission of any mention of *The Idiots* in the following positive assessment of the movement. In a rapt review of *The King is Alive* in *Film Quarterly*, Martha P. Nochimson catalogues “the more prolific output of Lars von Trier, which includes *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark*. (Von Trier has complicated the group’s credibility with the arguably illusionist rhetoric of both *Waves* and *Dancer*, and by producing a thoroughly hallucinogenic television series, *The Kingdom*, outside of the dogma canon.” (Nochimson 48). It is surely significant that in a discussion of Lars von Trier and Dogme 95 the author mentions every film he has recently directed other than his only Dogme film. Examples of this convenient scholarly amnesia abound in the criticism with weird

that the film's "inner-child message is a banal and well-worn one" (Brooks 35). He adds, "Ultimately, *The Idiots* emerges as a truly fascinating folly, an all-but-impenetrable muddle... less a filmic revolution than an Aesop's fable for anarchists" (35). Less sympathetic is David Sterritt, who concludes in *Film Comment* that the film fails to rise to the promise of the Dogme95 group's admirable aims. He notes that "While the best moments of *The Celebration* and *Mifune* demonstrate the appeal of this resurgent humanism, *The Idiots* misses the point of the manifesto von Trier helped create, using self-congratulatory sensationalism as an inadequate substitute for the psychological depth and sociological insight that must characterize realism under any label if it's to be fully expressive" (Sterritt 76). He also reiterates the common notion that the film is in spectacularly poor taste and an unwelcome deviation from the sensitivity to the marginalized found in, for instance, *The Kingdom* (1994): "In a move as puerile as it is unexpected, *The Idiots* replaces openness and understanding with mimicry and mockery, replicating the childishness of its characters by implicitly daring its own audience to move beyond 'political correctness' and get a vicarious charge from watching self-proclaimed rebels drool, slobber, and cavort the way real 'retards' do" (Sterritt 76). In the final analysis, Sterritt declares that "an artist of von Trier's stature can surely think of better ways to disrupt the cinematic status quo than by making the Dogma 95 equivalent of a teenage gross-out flick" (Sterritt 76). Although I will speak later at some length about the assumption, echoed here, that von Trier's and his Dogme brethren's disruptions are aimed exclusively at the 'cinematic status quo' and involves a simple replacement of the spectacular with the realistic, it is first worth looking to a source presumably more

and telling regularity, highlighting the extent to which *The Idiots* fits uneasily alongside the more accessible work of von Trier's Dogme brethren.

receptive to overtly critical ideological material, as I would argue that *The Idiots* clearly is.

The World Socialist Web Site's characteristically thoughtful appraisal of a film which is ideologically more in line with its political interests than it might first appear, finds that von Trier falls short in many areas, but at least recognizes to a nominal degree the dual target of his critique (film *and* culture). Suggesting that von Trier seems to have intended that Karen be his Joan of Arc (à la Carl Theodor Dreyer), Stefan Steinberg believes that, comparatively, the director's "presentation is infantile and shallow. One has the impression that the director has sought to defy and disrupt what he regards as bourgeois norms of behaviour and probity (and bourgeois ways of filmmaking) in the most provocative ways possible" (Steinberg). However, he finds that von Trier's political aspirations, if indeed they are those, are ultimately insufficient: "On the basis of *The Idiots*, one concludes that he is evidently motivated by a dislike, even a disgust for society as it stands. At the same time he is apparently blind to any way of changing society in a meaningful way. He has chosen the well-trodden and fairly threadbare path of individual self-liberation" (Steinberg)¹⁴. Provocatively, he concludes that "von Trier's film is an accurate portrayal of the anguish and frustration of a section of today's intelligentsia, unhappy in their own skins, but unable or unwilling to explore the

¹⁴ Von Trier is not so much 'blind' to ways of affecting cultural transformation 'in a meaningful way' as much as he is operating from the assumption that such change may perhaps only be accomplished today by *meaninglessness*. As well-trodden as it may be, this 'self-liberation' is precisely the point from which each of these subversive defamiliarizations suggests that any forging of a new subjectivity under late-capitalism *must* occur, by virtue of the specific features of our current hegemony.

possibilities for genuine social change—not a pretty sight and by no means the basis for a renewal of film culture” (Steinberg).¹⁵

“Film should be like a rock in the shoe” – Lars von Trier

The story of *The Idiots* is decidedly straightforward and offensive, in the best sense of each of these terms. *The Idiots* are a group of young middle-class Danes united by a shared dissatisfaction (albeit with varying degrees of intensity) with bourgeois culture and their place in it. They live together in a country house overseen by Stoffer, the group’s charismatic and perhaps unstable unofficial leader. The members of the commune express their multifaceted contempt for their culture in what can only reasonably be described as a thoroughly bizarre manner, a manner that is (along with, to a lesser extent, a clearly non-simulated orgy scene) the primary reason for the horrified reception the film has received. The group ‘spass’, or fake mental disability, taking turns acting as ‘minder’ or ‘spasser’ respectively. They do this for hours on end, both privately and defiantly in public. They ‘spass’ in fine restaurants, biker bars, and in public

¹⁵ Once more we encounter a film with explicitly political interests being denounced on the grounds that it depicts a manner of critique and of resistance that does not look like politics, and so *must not be*. On the rare occasions when these films were discussed in terms of their ideological content, both *Trainspotting* and *Fight Club* were also routinely rejected on the grounds that they contained no *genuinely* viable alternatives to the contemporary politics of everyday life they heap scorn upon. Ironically, the very explicitness of these alternatives (from heroin addiction and faking idiocy to the myriad forms of resistance depicted in *Fight Club*) is precisely what makes the films interesting and unusual in the first place. Clearly, each film uses a strange other way of life to shed light upon the ideology of our own, even if it is one that seems ridiculous. However, I would argue that rather than rejecting (or entirely neglecting) the visions they contain for this reason, we ought instead to ask why the parameters of possible expressions of resistance have become so narrow that we are not even able to consider deviations in these terms. From the perspective of critics like Steinberg, the way of life depicted in *The Idiots* need not be measured and rejected as an alternative system of being for the simple fact that it is not considered as such in the first place.

swimming pools, creating mayhem and acute discomfort wherever they go. They take their act on the road, going door to door selling costly but poorly constructed Christmas ornaments to their wealthy neighbors and taking guided educational tours of local businesses. If nothing else, spassing certainly allows the group the freedom not to participate in the conventional economy (which in some ways is its own reward and further reinforces the Situationist connection I will discuss later). In short, they prey on the civic fear and (perhaps) loathing of the mentally ill for a living. Spassing in restaurants means free meals, blackmailing local residents with wheelchair-unfriendly driveways provides provisions for days, and they are able to ensure that no-one buys the house Stoffer is supposed to be selling for his uncle because of its alleged and uncomfortable proximity to an “institution for retards”.

In a sense, *The Idiots* is also a curious entry in the film-within-a-film subgenre, in that part of its premise is that the group are the subjects of a documentary. The precise extent to which what we are watching is supposed to be a documentary (typically, one filmed by von Trier himself), though, remains highly ambiguous. Obviously this is the case when the spassers are being interviewed and directly address the camera, an interaction that overtly makes the scene epistemologically clear. However, all of the interviews seem to take place chronologically after the story is finished since the subjects tend to speak in the past tense, even when referring to events we have not yet seen. Similarly, although the presence of von Trier as documentarian is explicitly signaled during his interviews, how are we to read those apparently ‘off camera’ scenes wherein the camera or microphone sporadically enters our field of vision? Are the images being recorded by von Trier the actor playing a filmmaker or by the real von Trier? Because of

these seeming diegetic inconsistencies, it is never clear if we are meant to interpret all the remaining action as being a documentary or a documentary within a film. The relationship between the two cannot be consistently untangled. This device enables gestures at clarification to be included, as the narrator questions each member of the group about the reasons for their strange behaviour, which offers little in the way of definitive answers to the viewer's questions. This is far more than the standard commonplace bewilderment of the postmodern film, wherein its status as an object is called into question in an aesthetically playful way. In the peculiar case of *The Idiots*, we genuinely do not (and cannot) know precisely what it is we are supposed to be watching, and this is an instability that occurs at numerous levels.

The narrative is inelegantly spare and lumpy, with a digressive and spontaneous rhythm orchestrated around the groups' various diversions and pastimes. By virtue of the film's central premise, *The Idiots* needs only a nominal story, and such as it is it revolves around Karen, a fragile young woman who (we later learn) is emotionally distraught following the recent death of her infant son. Having left her grieving family and skipped out on the funeral, she meets members of the group as they are all being thrown out of a restaurant because they are unable to prevent their retarded guest from making a scene. Believing they are actually disabled, she agrees to help them return to their home, only to almost immediately discover the truth in the taxi when they burst into clearly non-disabled laughter at the brilliance of their performances. Finding something compelling, perhaps therapeutic about their 'spassing', she moves in with them for the duration of the film, even beginning (despite her initial revulsion and firm conviction that they are merely 'making fun'), to 'spass' herself. Other than the aforementioned trips into the

neighbouring community and a few horrified (and horrifying) visits to the house, the narrative meanders along under the speed of Stoffer's manic insistence that the group members ever more fully commit themselves to spassing. It is all fine and good that they spass with each other and with the general public, but he demands that they take it to its extreme, logical conclusion: they need to return to their mundane lives and spass there, in front of their friends, families, and co-workers. Obviously, this proves to be an agonizingly difficult task for them, and they each more or less fail to integrate spassing fully into their real lives, which itself raises questions about the practical viability of the resistance von Trier is presenting and/or proposing.

Essentially, *The Idiots* is an exploration of the group's reasons for 'spassing'. As I will discuss later, no single definitive reason for the group's behavior is unambiguously privileged over another. Certainly it provides them with the financial freedom to participate in culture in an unconventional and unproductive way, but it is clearly much more than that, always seemingly tinged by a Situationist-influenced ideology. Somehow, this activity enables them to remove their socially prescribed masks and comport themselves in a more 'genuine' manner. Their mock childlike actions enable them to express parts of themselves otherwise buried by decades of repressive socialization, to return to a (possibly fantasized) site before the subject is formed by discourse. Their oft-repeated claim that they are on a quest to search for their "inner idiots" represents an attempt to see the world from a fresh vantage point, to throw normal behaviour under critical scrutiny by (re)presenting its opposite. This view informs Stoffer's claim that "idiots are the people of the future" and that spassing is potentially "a step forward" for those that are brave enough to try it. Axel similarly suggests that his "anti middle class

ideology” is based on the idea that “there is something more than meaningfulness and purposefulness,” which suggests that a subjectivity that does not participate in the goals around which our society is constructed can *only* be attained by something as fundamentally warped as feigning disability. This argument contains echoes of Baudrillard’s recent position that the very process of becoming meaningful, of generating meaning regardless of its specific manifestation, has troubling repercussions for the subject. He too feels that a rejection of this process has a special kind of value, that because of the terrifyingly advanced state of development that characterizes our present hegemony, the only available kind of “strategic resistance is the refusal of meaning” (Baudrillard 112).¹⁶

Finding Meaning in Meaninglessness: Spassing and Situationism

It is in the way it spirals between the poles of meaning and meaninglessness that *The Idiots* participates so brilliantly in the same kinds of debates I will be discussing throughout this dissertation. It is arguably its frustrating lack of recognizable design that sets this film apart from more orderly critiques. It is bewilderingly vague in ways that far exceed the unusual and apparently perverse manner of their resistance: the group is “motivated by an unspecified anger against middle class propriety” (Falcon 12). The shifting object of Stoffer and the rest of the spassers’ rage is so broad as to be elusive. He violently opposes a gloriously diverse host of attitudes and objects and in doing so seems

¹⁶ If, for Baudrillard, meaninglessness constitutes the last frontier of counter-hegemonic resistance, for Žižek this site is occupied by his hazy concept of the act, which as we have seen is frequently expressed through madness, self-destruction or suicide. Although he has not written about *The Idiots*, I think the concept of spassing (especially when it poses a real threat to the subject, as is the case with Karen’s courageous actions at the film’s conclusion) could be read as an exemplary Žižekian act.

to recognize the extent to which the bourgeois ideology he abhors is spread throughout all of culture, embodied in absolutely everything. The worldview he despises is as present in things (as in his delightful complaint that “sheds are bourgeois crap”) as it is in the genteel concerns of the “Søllerød fascists” who try and bribe him to take his retards elsewhere. This awareness of the ideological complicity of all things in a hegemonic system is an all too rare discussion of one of the core problems of our culture, one which influential Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre articulates in his *Critique of Everyday Life*. In a passage that encapsulates Stoffer’s (and von Trier’s) interpretation of the plight of the common man, Lefebvre explains: “Bourgeois individualism implies the dreary, ludicrous repetition of individuals who are curiously similar in their way of being themselves and of keeping themselves to themselves, in their speech, their gestures, their everyday habits (meal times, rest times, entertainments, fashions, ideas, expressions)” (Lefebvre 90). It is this polite yet stifling uniformity, this “mystified consciousness” that spassing is an attempt to fiercely denounce, for it is precisely this conservative sameness that maintains the orderly surface of our culture and firmly positions and imprisons the subject within it.

Despite the most obvious reaction to spassing (that it does nothing, can teach us/them nothing), it is meaningful because of what it says about what meaning *means*, and how it contributes to the ideological base of our culture. It perhaps need not be proven that it is because of the outlandishness and *meaninglessness* of the central behavior of the characters that the film has faced so many critical obstacles. Although it is certainly the case that strange and pointless behaviour constitutes much of the onscreen activity of the most popular and mindless entertainments, spassing is unfamiliar to boot,

and as such operates very far away from the widely understood language of contemporary movies.

Ultimately, *The Idiots* is a difficult and weirdly embarrassing movie to watch because we are forced at all times to obsessively return again and again to the same perturbing question: what are they playing at? Our culture's attitudes toward the mentally ill are nothing if not complicated and confused, and *The Idiots* strikes directly at the awkward core of this perception by throwing our half-examined assumptions back in our faces. Furthermore, not only does von Trier *use* retardation as a metaphor with which to engage the way our social world is constructed, but he also includes graphic sexuality in the mix. Although the film contains several scenes featuring very explicit nudity, various censor boards have had particular problems with the orgy scene during which the spassers agree to Stoffer's request for a 'gangbang' that contains a lingering image of clearly non-simulated penetrative sex.¹⁷ Combining these two taboo areas as explicitly as von Trier does can only cumulatively lead to excruciatingly sustained discomfort for his audience,¹⁸ and this particularly subversive defamiliarization is clearly something the director is interested in exploring. Most uncomfortably perhaps, von Trier assembles a cast which includes really mentally handicapped actors among the fakers and has the two groups mingle in what is surely one of the most excruciating scenes in all of film history and definitely the least attractive portrayal of a picnic.

¹⁷ Because of this scene, *The Idiots* has been seen as emblematic of a new movement toward increasingly explicit sexuality in recent cinema in two recent articles on the subject: see Linda Williams, "Cinema and the Sex Act", and Richard Falcon, "Reality is too Shocking".

¹⁸ This discomfort has also translated to the films facing censorship problems throughout the world. In Ireland it was banned entirely, not because of the non-simulated sex scenes but for "moral" reasons. Many nations released an edited version, notably the US where

So, how then can *The Idiots* overcome the awkward horror it inspires and be restored to what I believe is its rightful place as the most dogmatic Dogme film to date (or certainly the one which engages most fully with the manifesto and Vow) and von Trier's most ultimately rewarding directorial outing? We must first consider his film's self-reflexive relationship to the Dogme rules as being brilliantly played out by his characters' 'spassing'. Then I shall suggest that *The Idiots* should not only be viewed as a Dogme95 film but also as a key illustration of a subversive defamiliarisation; the promotion of oppositional counter-hegemonic lifestyles which invariably take on an extremely unsettling and often perverse form. Viewed from these perspectives, both *The Idiots* and 'spassing' seem a much more comprehensible and challenging endeavor, one that reflects the outraged but compassionate voice of its creator railing not only at the state of film but also (in his case) about the state of Denmark. Arguably in a manner that is unlike any of his fellow Dogme directors, von Trier's concerns are simultaneously political and cinematic and call into question the relationship between the two.

Spassing, Dogme, and Disability

When style and content are one, you can't say artificial things.
- Jean-Luc Godard

I am trying to make a collision of the style and the content.
- Lars von Trier

The way von Trier approaches his collision of style and content is characteristically original and compelling and is enacted in several different ways. As many critics have observed, von Trier and his Dogme brethren seem genuinely obsessed with disability to a

the film was held back for two years and then finally released with ludicrous floating

degree that is both curious and startling. Both *Mifune* and *Julien Donkey-Boy*¹⁹ prominently feature disabled characters and, bizarrely, it has been more than a decade since von Trier made a film that did not substantially engage issues of disability.²⁰ Indeed, his last half dozen films are something of a compendium of disability stereotypes of various different sorts. Consider his recent 'The Golden Hearted Trilogy', of which *The Idiots* is strangely the central (or at least the middle) part. The bespectacled heroine of *Dancer in the Dark* is battling against a degenerative eye disease that will ultimately cause total blindness, a condition that drives both the plot and emotional impact of the film. The newlyweds in *Breaking the Waves* are a quadriplegic and a young woman who is quite possibly mentally disabled. Depending on how that film's dying moments are read, she is either pathological or priestly, either certifiably delusional or saintly, or both, or neither. Both installments of *The Kingdom* (1994 & 1997) constitute, in some ways, a twelve hour epic 'catalogue of afflictions,' featuring countless people with Down's syndrome, amputations, monstrously deformed babies, ruined organs and so seemingly without end. The eerie hospital setting is in some ways perfectly suited for von Trier's peculiar predilections since he is able to populate his narrative with at least as many sick and disabled minds and bodies as their are healthy or 'normal' ones, a feat he also quite nearly rivals in *The Idiots*. Although this is not the place for a full analysis of the

black bars covering some of the more explicit sexual images.

¹⁹ Rud, one of *Mifune*'s three principal characters and its primary source of comic relief, is mentally retarded. His retardation and comic appeal are perhaps not as unrelated as we might like. Julien, the titular character in *Julien Donkey-Boy*, is schizophrenic. Because he spends a lot of time with other mentally ill people, and because almost his entire family seems at least mildly off balance, the argument could easily be made that every one of Harmony Korine's character's has massive psychological problems, diagnosed or otherwise. Regardless, the Dogme directors' attraction to disability is both widespread and persistent.

²⁰ *Europa*, released in 1991

centrality of disability in these films, it is within this context that *The Idiots* must first be considered, since here von Trier's ongoing obsession is not only expressed but is also the subject of analysis.

Much of von Trier's body of work has been marked by the presence of ironic referentiality, an aspect of his style that initially earned him great favour amongst critics with fashionably postmodern leanings. What has perhaps gone unnoticed by those who feel *The Idiots* is a massive drop in form is that, unusually, the films which von Trier is shrewdly alluding to here are his own. Certainly, this is an oddly Scandinavian variant of the anxiety of influence. This is a far more complex and unusual relationship than that which was so lauded in his earlier works, where critics rapturously applauded his more overt and conventional homages to his directorial predecessors. Identifying these allusions seems to be a favourite game of professional critics: consider, for example, this passage from Phillip Strick's review of *Europa* for the journal *Sight and Sound*. He notes that the film takes us "firmly back to the time and territory of *Germany, Year Zero* (or, more suitably, given von Trier's evident allegiances, of Reed's *The Third Man*)...If *Element of Crime* was steeped in Welles and Tarkovsky, *Europa* seems more Bergman and Dreyer (Henning Bendtsen was also the cinematographer for *Ordet* and *Gertrud*), enhanced by such icons as Barbara Sokowa to remind us of Fassbinder and von Trotta, and Eddie Constantine to remind us of the prison-state called *Alphaville* and of a wealth of American influences" (Strick 48). This brand of analysis is a much harder sell in the case of *The Idiots*, since the dominant allusions are more internal than external, pointing to the methodology of its own construction. Although it has been variously compared to Klaus Rifbjerg's *Weekend* (1962), *La Grande Bouffe* (Marco Ferrari, 1973), *Shock*

Corridor (Samuel Fuller, 1963), the French New Wave, and (by von Trier) British films from 'the swinging sixties' such as *A Hard Day's Night* (Richard Lester, 1964), these referents are far less important than the mirror that the film holds up to itself. It can be argued that its allusions are to process rather than product, to methods of construction rather than to completed films. The 'spassing' behaviour of the characters must be directly aligned to the self-imposed restrictions that the Dogme filmmakers adopt in order to locate an elusive sense of the real. Viewed in this way, the liberating relinquishment involved in spassing is (also) a comment on the positive impact of intentionally not using the bag of technical tricks at a director's disposal. Despite their gimmicky appearance, both of these practises seem to have real redemptive, revolutionary, and critical potential.

The charismatic and arguably brilliant Stoffer should then be considered as a more or less direct representation of von Trier himself, someone who experiences great frustration as he tries to passionately coax his fellow malcontents to reconsider the way they function in opposition to a system they find abhorrent. Certainly the two figures have similarly grandiose and not entirely stable demeanors and seem equally forceful in their (likeminded) critiques of their culture.

In *The Humiliated* (1998), Jesper Jargil's documentary about the making of *The Idiots*, von Trier's ideological kinship to Stoffer is quite evident, as it also is in his published diaries about the ordeal of making the film. *The Humiliated* is significantly enlivened by von Trier's moodiness and sporadic outbursts of unhappiness, most of which echo his protagonist because they are motivated by a conviction that his actors are not spassing *enough* for him, or for the right reasons. Stoffer is similarly disgusted by his housemates when he feels they are not wholly giving themselves over to the cause,

particularly in the later scenes when he forces them to attempt to move spassing out of the commune and back into their real lives. The experiment is for him, and certainly for his director if we count the tears he causes (and sheds) during the making of the film, infinitely more important than any amount of hurt feelings or emotional distress.

If such things should be taken into account, we could also look to von Trier's childhood of communal living and 'champagne socialism,' where he was raised among similarly free-spirited artists and cultural activists. To find the origins of Stoffer's construction, we might look as well as to other formative biographical information such as the political activism of von Trier's earlier years as a member (as were his parents) of the Danish Communist Party. However, all that really needs to be shown with regard to this connection is that it supports the notion of a direct theoretical connection between the self-imposed disability of the director and the spassers. It is not insignificant that, of all the rules von Trier and Vinterberg could have established with which to remedy what ails the film world they chose the ones they did. The rules could have been very different, and there are countless (arguably 'better' or more practical) ways in which the rules of filmmaking could have been manipulated to various other effects. Any survey of the numerous manifestoes that have surfaced throughout the history of film reveals the extent to which, although the problems have an unfortunate tendency to remain the same, the solutions take on wildly divergent incarnations.²¹ Despite the brethren's repeated proclamations that the specific rules themselves are irrelevant (although this is a telling

²¹ As evidence of this, one need only consider the numerous stylistic and theoretical differences that separate each of the various different 'waves' (French New Wave, Free Cinema Movement, Dziga Vertov's collective, and so forth) that have surfaced throughout film history.

claim that should not be dismissed),²² there seems to be a direct relationship between the redemptive amateurishness called for in the manifesto and the meaningful ‘spassing’ presented in *The Idiots*.

So, if we can accept that Stoffer is a sort of stand in for the brilliant, misunderstood, and possibly deranged director, then the once loathsome behaviour of the film’s characters can then be viewed in a far more compelling light. ‘Spassing’ and Dogme directing, once aligned, are interesting primarily because of the serious problems that they each simultaneously articulate, critique, and aim to defamiliarize in their respective realms of film and reality. The manifesto aims to be a guide to creating a kind of tonic that will heal the bloated body of contemporary film and replace it with something radically other. Its primary aim is not to create legions of jagged, grainy films but “of countering ‘certain tendencies’ in the cinema today”. Despite much heated recent debate about the potentially liberating effects of digital technologies, it is worth bearing in mind that whether this liberation be financial or artistic or both, it is only potentially so. There is nothing inherently subversive or democratizing about recent advances in digitalization. Various products of the digital revolution [such as *Star Wars Episode II: The Attack of the Clones* (George Lucas, 2002)] including those with a genuinely Dogme visual style [such as *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and

²² Von Trier’s most recent ‘side-project’ reveals the extent to which he is also interested in the idea of establishing cinematic rules regardless of what those rules might be. A film he made with Danish documentarian Jorgen Leth called *The Five Obstructions* recently debuted at the 2003 Venice Film Festival to some acclaim. The premise is that Leth agreed to remake his cult 1967 short film *The Perfect Human* five times according to whatever rules von Trier wished to impose upon him. Characteristically, von Trier insisted upon Leth’s total adherence to completely strange and arbitrary ‘obstructions’ (some versions must be filmed in Cuba or India but no locals must be visible, one must be a cartoon, one must feature only shots that are only visible for half a second and so forth) which had the understandable effect of driving his friend to distraction.

Eduardo Sánchez)] are no less conservative and reactionary because of the novelty of the technology involved in their construction. Nor is Dogme95 really about these new gadgets in any necessary way. Rather, it is a “rescue action” specifically intended to devalue a certain kind of conventional wisdom about what a film *should* be by negatively articulating what is wrong with them and showing how they could be different. As budgets exponentially inflate, films must accordingly contain nothing that might substantially challenge or offend anyone and it is now difficult not to consider mainstream film as a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying absolutely nothing. If nothing else, *The Idiots* and its ideologically inflected construction must be viewed sympathetically as an attempt to disable this process by doing away with the technologies that facilitate it.

The Politics of Film: *The Idiots* and Embodied Resistance

The startling idiocy of *The Idiots*' mock disabled characters symbolizes an embodied resistance: they relinquish their mastery of the world around them and become in some ways born again. It is this kind of experimentalism with theme and form which subverts our expectations so superbly in *The Idiots*, a film that never for a moment allows us to be lulled by displays of technical mastery (it contains none) and forces us to experience it in a genuinely engaged way. We are repeatedly made uncomfortable by our awareness of our own involvement as von Trier masterfully controls his material (even as he has unmastered himself) so that the central premise never becomes static and predictable. For instance, in one of the most jarring on screen moments in recent memory, the activity of the spassers seems to be becoming soothingly familiar to us. They live happily in their

beautiful country home, spassing when they feel like it, taking trips into the local community in order to horrify them. These memorable forays prompted *Artforum* critic Howard Hampton to note that “von Trier’s scraggly bunch of sadist-idealists are like slacker descendants of the Baaden-Meinhof gang: emotional terrorists” (Hampton 20). As things seem to momentarily level out, von Trier injects some truly unsettling tension into the proceedings by introducing an actual group of mentally disabled adults from a nearby home, who join the spassers for lunch. To say that this intrusion is awkward is a gross understatement and it forces us to re-evaluate precisely why our characters do the things they do. The accusations of mean-spiritedness directed at spassing both within the film and in response to it seem most reasonable at this moment. This discomforting technique is used throughout, as the value and meaning of spassing is repeatedly thrown into sharp relief by various events (including multiple revelations about the potential madness of various group members), demanding that we continually interrogate the film as it shakily unfolds before us.

It seems unlikely that *The Idiots* could be effectively made without the confines of the Dogme manifesto as it is precisely these technical limitations that help it achieve its bewildering overall impact. The look and sound are deceptively simple as it lacks many of the stabilizing devices which are traditionally used to give an audience clues about how to read the film and to recognize its attitude to its subject matter. These technico-responsive pointers are made highly conspicuous by their absence, throwing into relief the extent to which they effect the way we read a film. We are given no musical score with which to clarify moments of emotional ambiguity, the selective addition of which could easily transform sections of this film into slapstick comedy, stirring drama, or high

tragedy. Because of the sporadic and inconsistent on-screen presence of the director (both literally and suggestively, as reflected by the hand held camerawork) we are never sure exactly what we are viewing. The shaky camerawork also steals from von Trier the cherished ability of a director to convey meaning and add symbolic commentary on the action through *mise en scène*, as the film entirely does away with carefully constructed shots and makes little use of foreground and background. Similarly, the Dogme rules also strip the director of the ability to establish mood or thematic tone through lighting and optical trickery as they are entirely at the disposal of what light can be captured on their rudimentary cameras.²³ This unusual lack of cinematic direction is integral to the film's

²³ One of the more memorable issues surrounding the production and release of the film involved a feud between von Trier and his producer (and Zentropa Studios co-founder) Aalbaek Jensen. Jack Stevenson explains the basis of the dispute which genuinely threatened the future of Zentropa: "On 20 August 1999, while *The Idiots* was out in a wider world splitting critics and public alike, von Trier got what was for him some disturbing news from a couple of the other Dogma brothers. They had heard from a couple of 'loose lips' at Zentropa's film lab that Aalbaek Jensen and Videke Windelov had instructed them to use a post-production filtering process to lighten the film when they struck the release prints.

Von Trier was furious and fired off press-releases damning this breach of the Vows of Chastity (vow 5: Optical work and filters are forbidden). Windelov was in the US when she received von Trier's 'completely hysterical, completely insane' phone call. He demanded that all prints be recalled, which was of course impossible.

Aalbaek Jensen and Windelov apologized but countered that they felt themselves economically pressed to lighten the film, otherwise it would be too dark to see anything. Reportedly von Trier had actually already seen a print of the lightened version and hadn't noticed (which raises the question of why they needed to make a lightened version). Von Trier felt patronised, that people were telling him it was 'for his own good', and that's what infuriated him the most.

A meeting was arranged between von Trier and Aalbaek Jensen. There was much shouting and yelling before von Trier stormed out four minutes later. The fate of the studio seemed to hang in the balance" (Stevenson 132). While order was eventually restored, this episode shows the extent to which von Trier is both serious and passionate about these technical limitations. As the brothers suggest on the dogme website, "There is an implicit duplicity in the Dogma manifesto. On one hand it contains a deep irony, and on the other hand is seriously meant."

success as it makes unusual demands on the viewer, requiring us to adopt different interpretive strategies.

Characteristically, the narrative offers little assistance in this regard, as it too seems designed to obscure the possibility of casual consumption. It also goes out of its way in this regard to preclude the kind of easily earned pleasures that conventional narratives can afford. As the manifesto dictates, it is clearly not generic and contains no action that is typically superficial. Even when a recognizable structural device is used, it is engaged in a way that subverts our expectations. The film within a film trope, for instance, presents moments when group members attempt to explain their collective project. However, these speeches possess little explanatory value and if anything only function to further deepen our confusion at their behaviour. Acting as documentarian/interviewer, von Trier echoes our growing irritation with the group members' inability to explain their seemingly insane actions with any kind of consistency by demanding "an understandable summary" and complaining that he has "heard 17 different versions".

Initially, the film seems to use the device of presenting strangeness to an audience through the eyes of an outsider whom we can identify with in order to ease our discomfort. Again, we become rapidly aware that this will not be the case. Although Karen initially seems cast in this explanatory role by virtue of her status as a 'normal' outsider, she almost immediately loses her ability to play this role. As soon as she joins the group she not only develops a need-motivated affinity with the spassers but also tries to help them and ultimately begins spassing herself, all of which preclude her from playing the role of the unbiased source. Again and again we are led to believe that we are

nearing a stable truth (which we need more and more as the film progresses) only to have it repeatedly deferred and problematized. Using this method of repeated subversion, von Trier is able to posit spassing as a maddening theoretical mystery at the heart of his film, the meaning (or lack there) of which must be constructed by the individual viewer based on scant and contradictory evidence. None of the spassers seem fully in agreement over what it means, giving conflicting reports about why it helps them. Thus, for Karen what it seems to be is an attempt to work through her terrible grief at the death of her son with communal support. Ped the doctor seems to be using the group as dissertation research and advertising executive Axel just wants to have sex. For the enigmatic Stoffer it seems a purely counter-cultural obsession, a defamiliarizing spit in the face of the superficial and spiritually bankrupt bourgeois society he despises. He is clearly the most heavily invested in the mission, critiquing the performances of the other spassers and giving us the most frequent and articulate insights about the subversive power of “getting in touch with one’s inner idiot”. But, again, given the manic outbursts which on one occasion (after scaring away the local bureaucrat who tried to bribe him to move to another town by tearing all his clothes off and chasing his car screaming “Søllerod fascists!”) require that he be physically restrained for several hours until he calms down, he may well be mad. As a clarifying window into the film, and a possible explicator of its odd logic, group leader or not, the nude screaming man tied up in the attic is not without problems. Certainly, particularly for viewers unconvinced (or unaware) of the film’s politics, Stoffer’s personal charm is not enough to override the suspicions about his sanity that call the wisdom of his critique into question.

As one might expect by now, the conclusion of the film offers little clarification of that which has preceded it.²⁴ We learn about Karen's dead child as she returns to her home to be reunited with a family who have not seen or heard from her since the day of the funeral she did not attend two weeks prior. Previously, Stoffer, distraught at what he perceives as a general lack of commitment to the redemptive cause of spassing, had assigned various group members the task of returning to their daily lives and spassing outside of the communal support offered by the group. This experiment initially seems an abject failure as spasser after spasser refuses to relinquish their social masks. Karen's situation is much more dire, as her family are presumably already furious at her because of her unexplained absence during a time of great hardship. Regardless, as things start coming apart between the spassers and Stoffer is deeply suspicious of anyone's willingness to transport spassing into their real lives, Karen agrees to try it and returns home. Shortly after entering a home filled with palpably unsettling tension, she begins to spass, twitch and drool food all over herself to her family's astonishment. Enraged, her husband brutally slaps her across the face in order to silence her and halt her admittedly bizarre and inappropriate behaviour. Susanne, who accompanies her from the commune for support, says "That's enough now, Karen. Shall we go?", to which she responds after a terribly weighted pause, "Yes" and they quietly leave. On this highly ambiguous note,

²⁴ Nor, incidentally, does the introduction. Despite von Trier's multiple use of typically informative devices (such as Karen's initial outsider status and the film's mock documentary) we learn very little because we are not present for the genesis of spassing. In this respect, the film strangely begins some time after its' subject does, and we learn virtually nothing about how, when, or why the group initially came together and began to spass.

the film concludes.²⁵ Again, it is for us to decode the cryptic finale and to relate it to the rest of the film.

Rather than end my analysis by presenting a(n attempt at a) definitive reading that would somehow cut through the film's ambiguities, I would like to simply suggest once more that it is already a working out of many of the charges that have been leveled against it. The film's openness to a diversity of interpretation, its strangeness and the defamiliarizing questions it forces us to ask about it (and about ourselves) are an integral part of its project. It is a culturally subversive film about the difficulty of making a culturally subversive film *and* about the ways in which cultural subversion can and can not be practiced today: it is a critical inquiry into critical inquiry. As a too rare testing of limits in contemporary cinema (of good taste, yes, but of ways of negotiating a subjectivity in and out of the ideology of our culture too), its potential ought not to be overlooked. An open-minded reconsideration of *The Idiots* may help us create films that are genuinely subversive, that can help us fix what is wrong with our films and our culture by shedding a necessarily strange and defamiliarizing critical light on them. Von Trier's film should be regarded as possessing at least the potential for substantial transformation in both these spheres, for providing us with a new perspective on each. Stoffer, the director's double in my reading of the film, sums up what both men (real and fake) hope to accomplish through their peculiar and intertwined projects: "if you could see things differently, you might see the beauty of them".

²⁵ Indeed, we might read the final scenes as not constituting the film's close at all. Just as the film seems to begin after the beginning, so too does the ending apparently happen before the end. Large portions of the documentary footage that is disseminated throughout the 'real' story are clearly meant to have been filmed long after the group have disbanded and ceased to spass, and therefore technically occur after the film's final scene.

Chapter 5

Conclusion: Other Modes of Subversive Defamiliarization

Throughout the battered century of world wars and massive violence by other means, there had always been an undervoice that spoke through the cannon fire and ack-ack and that sometimes grew strong enough to merge with the battle sounds. It was the struggle between the state and secret groups of insurgents, state-born, wild-eyed—the terrorists, assassins and revolutionaries who tried to bring about apocalyptic change. And sometimes of course succeeded. The passionate task of the state was to hold on, stiffening its grip and preserving its claim to the most destructive power available... The state controlled the means of apocalypse. But (J.)Edgar (Hoover), by the window, heard the old alarms. He thought the time might be coming, once again, when ideas became insurgent and rebel bands were reborn, longhair men and women, scruffy and free-fucking, who moved toward armed and organized resistance, trying to break the state and bring about the end of the existing order.

- Don DeLillo, *Underworld*

The world (continuity and distinction) is an outright fiction of the imagination.

- Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity*

As I have suggested, *Fight Club*, *Trainspotting* and *The Idiots* succeed by making visible and challenging the ideologies that connect the practices of everyday life to broader structures of power, and by locating this politics of everyday life as the site at which resistance must be directed. Each presents extreme forms of resistance in order to force us to consider the infinite ways in which even (and particularly) our most conventional behaviour participates in and reinscribes contemporary systems of dominance. They are also each a kind of imaginative failure. However, the conditions that guarantee their failure (to fully imagine a subjectivity external to late-capitalist hegemony) are precisely

what these subversive defamiliarizations are about. There are, of course, other ways in which texts can function as subversive defamiliarizations and I will conclude my dissertation by describing other recent cultural products that have attempted to achieve similar effects using different strategies.

If many of the forms of resistance these texts have documented, especially in their most dangerous, nonsensical, and extreme manifestations, approach what Žižek terms an *act*, other novelists and filmmakers have used a wide variety of devices in order to defamiliarize the politics of everyday life. Hegemony can be challenged and contested in countless ways—ones in which the subject does *not* “suspend the network of symbolic fictions which serve as a support to his daily life and confront[s] the radical negativity on which they are founded” (Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 53)—and this is reflected in the diversity of approaches found in texts whose aim is to forward a defamiliarizing cultural critique. The myriad ways in which subjects can transform their relationship to a culture they feel ideologically alienated from is a familiar trope of the contemporary cultural landscape, even in narratives not primarily interested in political critique. Consider, for example, the following passage from Poppy Z. Brite’s cult horror novel, *Drawing Blood*, in which her characters discuss precisely this topic:

Zach believed in trying to undermine, subvert, and chivvy away the vast American power structure in as many tiny ways as possible, while Trevor opined that it was best to either go out and blow shit up or simply slip through the cracks and ignore the system altogether. (Brite 246)

Similarly, even seemingly extreme acts of anti-corporate resistance are now fictionally

represented as merely an incidental part of daily life in novels such as Douglas

Coupland's *All Families are Psychotic*:

'Is it true that you guys met while setting fire to a Gap?'
'Yeah, I just wanted to set fire to things and destroy shit...
But in general? I hate corporations. They're fucked. I'd like
to blow them all up. (Coupland 56)

However, in this conclusion I will focus principally on drawing attention to those works that are substantially concerned with adopting a critical stance toward contemporary culture and that do so in compelling ways. The most obvious way to set oneself apart from a despised hegemony is simply to abandon it, a strategy found in several recent critical works. I have already mentioned Danny Boyle's adaptation of Alex Garland's novel *The Beach*, which posits a fantastic alternative to the ideology of Western cultural imperialism that Garland suggests has spread almost entirely across the globe. The film's rootless hero, Richard, scours the planet looking for an unspoiled space which he believes he has found when he reaches an Edenic island off the coast of Thailand populated by a secretive community who share his desire to evade an oppressive consumer culture. *The Beach* is similar in this regard to Paul Theroux's *The Mosquito Coast* (adapted for the screen by Peter Weir, 1986) in which an eccentric inventor relocates his family to a Central American jungle because of a jaded view of the state of contemporary Western culture. Although less drastic, the same impulse is also found in the cult film *Office Space* but expressed in a radically different and more specific way. *Office Space* is the story of Peter, a data entry clerk who is simultaneously

bored, depressed and stressed out by his life in general and his job in particular. He finds cathartic release when, after a mishap at a hypnotist's office, he is able to completely stop caring about the everyday problems that once plagued him. This oppositional stance takes the form of a kind of amplified passive resistance. He does not abandon his culture but simply stops involving himself in any of the activities that once brought him so much misery.¹ Rather than quitting his job, he simply stops going to work unless he feels like it. While this is clearly not a sustainable strategy of resistance, the air of calm that descends over him once he turns his back on those trappings of contemporary life that once hobbled him and begins to think about what he actually wants to do is irresistible, as it is when Lester (Kevin Spacey) adopts a similar posture in *American Beauty*. This contagious sense of freedom comes from precisely the same subversive impulse to simply take flight from our present reality that is more dramatically presented in *The Beach* and *The Mosquito Coast*. Witnessing others decide to simply reject what our culture has to offer (particularly when reality is satirized, made to seem at once familiar and ludicrous) forces us for a moment to consider the ways we live our lives.

Another way in which the defamiliarizing impulse has recently been articulated is by presenting characters who, rather than setting themselves apart from culture or radically resisting it, completely immerse themselves in late-capitalist ideology and are revealed to be insane as a consequence. Three recent works most forcefully demonstrate

¹ The novels of Douglas Coupland are, more than any other contemporary author, populated with similarly dissatisfied figures who operate from within, but from the fringes of, their culture in an attempt to distance themselves from some of its more

this critical approach: Chuck Palahniuk's *Survivor*, Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama* and, particularly, his infamous *American Psycho*. All three of these novels feature protagonists defined by the surreal degree to which they embrace and embody the values and excesses of their culture. A brief discussion of these novels reveals the ways in which a defamiliarizing effect can be generated by these other means, that this kind of cultural critique can be enacted by narratives in which the characters occupy the seeming antithesis of a critical posture.

Survivor is the story of Tender Branson, the last surviving member of a disbanded religious cult whose followers have been gradually killed off under suspicious circumstances. Tender relates his story via the black box of an empty passenger plane which will soon run out of fuel and crash somewhere in Australia.² Tender describes his formative years on the cult's isolated compound where he was indoctrinated with their strange value system. Once the group's activities (particularly the hazily explained references to incestuous sexual practices) were made public and they were forcibly disbanded, Tender and the rest of his family were retrained and then scattered throughout a wider culture many of them had no experience with.

disagreeable ideological components and lifestyle effects.

² The sense of fatality is represented by the fact that the page and chapter numbers are descending, counting down to one. A similar device is also used in *Glamorama* to different effect. In Ellis's novel, the pagination is normal but the first five chapters are divided into many sections which numerically countdown to zero, whereas the sixth and final chapter counts up from zero. If Palahniuk uses his novel's chronology to enhance the pervasive atmosphere of apocalyptic foreboding, Ellis's more random application of this technique highlights the meandering aimlessness and dislocation from reality that defines his characters' lives.

The first half of the novel presents Tender occupying an uneasy and liminal subjectivity, torn between the ideological conditions under which he was raised and those of contemporary culture. As an awkward outsider, he is ill-suited to the demands of the real world, but his puritanical work ethic and encyclopaedic knowledge of home economics makes him ideally suited for retraining as a servant. Accordingly, after some necessary training, he adapts to this role at the house of a wealthy family, whose lives he manages down to the smallest detail even if he is unable to live a conventional life himself. While he is impressively well-versed in the minutiae of maintaining a bourgeois lifestyle, he has no interests or friends of his own, still looks exactly as he did when in the cult (unfashionable haircut, plain clothes) and does not seem at all concerned about anything other than serving his masters with total efficiency.

This all changes when the only other remaining cult member is murdered, and he becomes the sole surviving member of the Creedish Death Cult. The ongoing murders of his former family have attracted enormous media attention and, when the public is made aware that he is the last man standing, he is approached by a publicist whose aim it is to transform him from a sad loner into a postmodern celebrity. In going along with this plan he begins to be transformed into the superstar religious prophet a sinister public relations firm has already envisioned and (extensively) planned to bestow upon the last cult member, regardless of who they were. Tender becomes a star, an event. He allows himself to become fully integrated into the bizarre and massive multimedia campaign that had been lacking only a subject, but he needs to be altered first, turned into a symbol of

our particular culture's desires. A team of experts in various fields set to work making Tender take on the qualities they had already ascribed to him, and they need to do so quickly. He is forced to reconstitute his entire body through absurdly extensive and improbable exercise and drug regimes, which almost kill him. Although his constant steroid use and stair climbing virtually demolish him in numerous different ways, they are necessary:

But you still look terrific And you are, you're the American Dream. You are the constant-growth company.

According to the agent, the people out there looking for a leader, they want vibrant. They want massive. They want dynamic. Nobody wants a little skinny god. They want a thirty-inch drop between your chest and waist sizes. Big pecs. Long legs. Cleft chin. Big calves.

They want more than human.

They want larger than life size.

Nobody wants just anatomically correct.

People want anatomical enhancement. Surgically augmented. New and Improved. Silicone-implanted.

Collagen-Injected. (Palahniuk 136)

His team of image-makers fashion him into precisely such a figure, handily dealing with any problems that crop up as a result. When he reacts badly to one of the many drugs he takes, they give him other drugs to neutralize the negative side-effects or at least to create other, more advantageous ones. When his hair falls out, they buy him a wig made of "better" hair than he had in the first place. When he complains that his muscles have become so large that he is unable to bend down and fasten his shoelaces, his agent hires someone to do this for him. Through this laborious process, he is eventually able to resemble the icon they intend to sell, the perfect physical specimen, the total embodiment

of what our culture considers ideal.

The other major obstacle that needs to be overcome is that he is, in fact, not a religious prophet at all but a socially incompetent introvert. This requires the deployment of a whole other team of mythmakers. Typically, the public relations firm has matters well in hand and knows precisely what is needed to make Tender become the illusion the public craves:

The music team was busy writing hymns even before I was under contract. The writing team was busy putting my autobiography to bed. The media team was doing press releases, merchandizing licensing agreements, the skating shows: The Creedish Death Tragedy on ice, the satellite hookups, tanning appointments. The image team has creative control on appearance. The writing team has control of every word that comes out of my mouth. (133-134)

The radical transformation Tender undergoes is noteworthy because it is always framed by Palahniuk in terms of desires that are quite familiar, although satirically heightened.³

His beauty, wealth, lifestyle and consumption habits are carefully presented so that they

³ Mark Leyner's satiric postmodern novel *Et tu, Babe?* presents an equally heightened depiction of our culture's everyday lifestyle practices and obsession with appearance. The author is the main character of his own work, and is surrounded at all times by various members of "Team Leyner," a group of lifestyle specialists who help to maintain and enhance each component of his public image through various extreme interventions and sinister drug supplements. Although such modifications (of appearance, lifestyle personality) are dramatically satirized in these novels, the process they refer to is far from unfamiliar to anyone aware of contemporary popular culture. Transformations of this radical kind are presently enormously popular both for their entertainment and pedagogical value. This is reflected by the phenomenal success of television shows such as "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," makeover segments, psychotherapy sessions and weight loss success stories on daytime talk shows, as well as the myriad programs in which a person's home or garden is made to look beautiful by professional landscapers and interior designers.

are once recognizably our own *and* absurdly excessive. Tender becomes a glorious celebrity, moving to this culturally adored state from his previous pathetic existence in a very short time. He shifts from a position of social marginality, where he was literally unfamiliar with the conventions of late-capitalist life to a complete immersion in, and embodiment of, these discourses. From genuinely not knowing what our culture collectively desires, he becomes a paragon of consumerist desires, dreams and aspirations.

However, the stringent demands of adopting this new role as the American Dream incarnate obviously has massive repercussions on his subjectivity, on who he is as a person. Tender's transformation is too drastic and happens too quickly and he rapidly descends into madness. When he is forced to go on the run from the police after a much hyped halftime wedding at the Superbowl takes a strange and deadly turn, he becomes increasingly deranged because his coexisting addictions to celebrity and the lavish pleasures of consumer culture can no longer be sufficiently fueled. If Tender seemed unhinged when he was at the height of his powers, his childlike cravings for a return to his former life after only a few days makes him seem maniacal, almost feral:

I need a full body wax, I yell. I need hair mousse.
I'm pounding on the door.
I need two hours in a good weight room. I need to go
three hours on a stair climbing machine....
I'm retaining water. I'm losing definition in my
shoulders. My eye bags need concealer. My teeth are shifting
I need my wires tightened. I need my dietician. Call my
orthodontist. My calves are wasting away. I'll give you anything
you want. I'll give you money....
I need moisturizer. I need to be photographed. I'm not like

regular people, to survive I need to be constantly interviewed.
I need to be in my natural habit, on television. I need to run
free, signing books. (52-54)

If further proof of Tender's psychological collapse once the pleasures of consumer culture are taken from him is needed, we need only look to the fact that he begs to be turned over to the police, to be taken to prison (even though he knows he will face the electric chair) so that he can use a gym. Only months after living a simple life on the fringes of society, his indoctrination into the ideology of consumer culture in all its forms is so complete that he would rather die than live without the satisfaction it affords. If he is, as he suggests, "not like regular people," the novel makes it clear that this is a qualitative difference rather than a quantitative one. He is exactly "like regular people," *only more so*. Structurally, the early establishment in the novel of the strangeness of Tender's life in the cult when viewed from outside is later juxtaposed with the bizarre excesses of our own world which is thoroughly defamiliarized. In *Survivor*, it is revealed to be every bit as arbitrary and pointless as the Creedish Death Cult.

A similar critical strategy is used repeatedly by Bret Easton Ellis in both *American Psycho* and *Glamorama*, albeit in a slightly different way. Whereas Palahniuk depicts a collapse into madness inspired by the eventual adaptation of a late-capitalist lifestyle, Ellis's protagonists are presented as never being anything other than totally immersed in consumerist ideology. The connection between madness and the discourses of contemporary culture comes via the protagonists: in *American Psycho* the narrator (Patrick Bateman) is a sociopathic serial killer for the novel's entirety, and in *Glamorama*

the main character (Victor Ward) becomes increasingly unable to function in an unreal world as a consequence of his social circumstances. Neither text is as *explicitly* critical of our culture as the other subversive defamiliarizations discussed, but both are forceful assaults on hegemony articulated implicitly by demonstrating that the most mundane foundations of everyday life can be recognized as pathological if they are simply taken to their logical extreme.

This is not to say that either Patrick Bateman or Victor Ward *intends* to act in a way that surreptitiously reveals the deep contradictions of our culture. On the contrary, neither character would even comprehend the idea that such a critique is necessary or justifiable in the first place.⁴ Rather, Ellis's satirical effect stems from the complete obliviousness of his characters, whose largely uncriticized actions are offered in such a manner that the reader must recognize the connection between their own practices and attitudes and those which are clearly pathologized in the novels.

The profoundly unreliable narrator of *Glamorama* is, as various magazines in the novel announce, the celebrity "it boy" of the day. Although primarily occupying that

⁴ For instance, in *Glamorama*, Victor is understandably bewildered when his attempt to seduce one of his girlfriend's friends fails because she disproves of his celebrity lifestyle. Their conversation suggests the extent to which the ridiculousness of his existence to those outside it is genuinely incomprehensible to him: "I'm not really part of that scene.' 'What scene, baby?' 'The one where all anyone is interested in is who's fucking who, who has the biggest dick, the biggest tits, who's more famous than whoever.' Confused, I keep following. 'And you're, um, not like into this?' I ask, watching her wave down a taxi. 'You've got like a problem?'" (Ellis 98-99) As we shall see, a similarly unreflective attitude toward the conditions of his life and his culture is one of the defining characteristics of *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman, who is equally oblivious to the consequences of his actions, as well as those of the economic paradigm he represents.

uniquely postmodern space of being famous for being famous (largely because he is dating an even more famous supermodel), Victor dabbles idly in various high profile professions. He is a model, performs in a band, is trying to begin an acting career, and is opening a nightclub that will cater to (and absolutely *only* to) an elite list of *au courant* celebrities. Although not particularly gifted in any of these creative arenas, his enviable cultural status ensures that, like Tender Branson, he is constantly in the public eye and is persistently being interviewed, photographed and filmed by various media outlets as the novel progresses. Essentially, he is cool for a living, and he is well-equipped to play this particular role. He is a very attractive twenty-something and, if by no means intelligent in the conventional sense of that term, he knows everything about celebrity living and always seems to be several steps ahead of whatever product or practice the media are about to define as hot, hip, or happening. Everyone in his entire world is famous and/or beautiful because, as he repeatedly states throughout the book, “the better you look, the more you see.”

When viewed from the outside, however, his life seems exaggeratedly superficial and takes on surreal dimensions. Because of who he is and what he represents, his world simultaneously inspires jealousy and comic horror in the reader. Such as it is, Victor’s personality is marked by a curious commingling of inane pretentiousness and utter guilelessness. Although it is a part of his job to appear cooler and more “in the know” than everyone else—a social dominance which must be continually reasserted—he is also not terribly bright. Because he only interacts with others like him, his conversations are

frustratingly superficial. He generally speaks almost entirely in his own favorite enigmatic clichés and incessantly incorporates lines from popular songs and films into his distracted and ambling speeches. The hyper-banality of his style of dialogue is shared by most of those in the novel and only becomes a subject of discussion on the few occasions when he is made to account for himself to a figure not fully immersed in his strange, rarefied world. At lunch with his father, a Washington politician who is concerned about how his son's vapid and hedonistic existence may impact his forthcoming presidential campaign, Victor is made to explain some comments he made during various interviews. He is quoted in the *New York Times*' Style Section, for instance, as saying "In the uterus of love, we are all blind cave fish" (91). Similarly, *Youthquake* magazine lists the three people Victor would most like to have lunch with as "the Foo Fighters, astrologist Patric Walker...and the Unabomber" (92). The more general descriptions of his life are equally inane and nonsensical. Much of the first section of the book consists of Victor's attempts to perfect the guest list and seating arrangements for the launch of the chic new club he is opening. We are therefore made privy to seemingly endless discussion from him and others about which of the countless possible list of celebrities should be allowed to attend, with whom they should sit, *and why*. Naturally, the initial quirky charm this material possesses quickly dissipates (at least for us), leaving in its wake a sense of irritation at the popular fixation on the lifestyles of the rich and famous, who are invariably revealed to be wholly unworthy of our attention whatsoever.

However vapid and pointless his life appears, Victor is nonetheless initially very

much in control of the strange universe in which he exists. As slight an accomplishment as it may seem, he is good at what he does—for a while. Things begin to change, however, when the countless different ‘situations’ he has been juggling—a host of interpersonal problems with girlfriends, bosses, coworkers, the media, potential employers, betrayed friends—become too much for him to handle. For reasons too complicated and contrived to list here, he decides to leave the country on a mysterious ‘assignment’ and it is then that things start to become increasingly strange, both for himself and, consequently, for the reader who sees the world through his eyes. The ensuing detachment from reality is manifested in a specific way that is a function of the life Victor leads. He is at once a subject of media scrutiny and experiences as reality a celebrity universe created for and by the media, as does Tender in *Survivor*. Because all of Victor’s friends are wealthy and powerful, he is not just surrounded by models and film stars but by mysterious billionaires, political figures, and various other international jet-setters. They all seem to dwell in the strange alternate universe in which fame and power, regardless of how it is come by or can be applied, is all that matters. As is the case in our own postmodern media age, seemingly disparate areas of culture become intertwined and leveled in significance: news is a program on television and television shows are news, politics is entertainment and entertainment is politics, popular culture informs the real world and the real world informs popular culture.

The perverse inversions of this complicated matrix become too much for Victor to deal with. Strange events precipitate his psychological disintegration. He is, for instance,

mistaken for other similarly beautiful celebrities so frequently that he is routinely unable to tell whether a picture in a magazine is actually of him or not, or whether he in fact attended whatever glamorous function the photographs depict.⁵ He is equally unsure of the identity of others and cannot delineate various of his celebrity friends and even lovers. Seemingly stable and ahistorical concepts (time, existence, identity) become defamiliarized as Ellis interrogates the way they are fully informed by, and experienced through the lens of, the particular manifestation of our culture at this specific historical moment. Victor's mental collapse occurs both within the parameters of, and as a consequence of, our contemporary cultural milieu. Once he leaves New York, the once ontologically stable (if slightly strange) world in which Victor resides seems to collapse entirely, both for him and the reader. The typically *theoretical* idea that contemporary reality is structured and defined by popular culture becomes literalized in the text, as reality and representations of that reality become inseparable, with bewildering effects. After various strange meetings and disconcerting occurrences (he begins receiving ominous anonymous faxes, is always followed by mysterious black jeeps populated by armed male models, becomes embroiled with foreign operatives and terrorist plots, bodies begin appearing), Victor's diegetic reality becomes wholly deranged. The sinister events of which he becomes an integral part are impossible to untangle because we are

⁵ In one of the novel's most memorable running jokes, he is habitually mistaken for actor Skeet Ulrich and actually misidentifies *himself* in images of Ulrich (and vice-versa) on numerous occasions. This late-capitalist disintegration of individual identity and its myriad effects on (the way subjects perceive) reality is, as we shall see, similarly explored in Ellis's *American Psycho*.

entirely unsure of what is happening. It is possible he is starring in a film, which may be about terrorists. It is possible he is being filmed for his involvement with terrorists, or is in a film *and* being filmed for his involvement with terrorists. The people who continually film him (often from afar) may be documentarians recording his everyday life, or they may be directing the film (he may be starring in), or they may be agents from any one of several possible groups interested in the terrorist activities he may be participating in.⁶ The acts of violence he witnesses, experiences and instigates may be real or staged. The celebrities who surround him may be simply real celebrity friends or costars in the film he may be involved in. He may misrecognize photographs of himself in places he could not have been, or the photos could be manipulated, or he could actually have been places he doesn't remember. Worse still, in a late plot development, it is also possible he has been cloned and that his double has taken over his real life. Significantly, and with surreal effect, none of these possibilities is privileged over another, and the truth of each has ample evidence to support it. Although he maintains an external semblance of order, making sure he plays the part of Victor by continuing his daily routines, his full dissociation from reality is evident through the increasingly indecipherable chain of narrative events which spiral around him.

Glamorama's critique, then, takes place on an implicit, structural level. Our

⁶ Even before he fully loses touch with reality, his daily life is such that impairments of this sort are less surprising than they ought to be. He is always being filmed, as is everyone around him. For instance, when MTV is interviewing him for a segment on "House of Style," he nonchalantly explains that "some Japanese guy is filming the interview that MTV will be filming and another Japanese guy is taking photographs of

culture's desires and obsessions (our ideas about money, appearances, consumption, entertainment, celebrity) are defamiliarized by the novel as a whole rather than by specific critical articulations. Although Victor seems at times relatively unfazed by his inability to tangibly experience reality, Ellis's text uses the growing madness of his protagonist's world in order to show the strangeness inherent in our own, to defamiliarize the ideological assumptions that underscore late-capitalist life.

Ellis's earlier novel, *American Psycho*, adopts an identical critical strategy to address the cultural moment within which its graphic sexual violence occurs. Because of its elusive critique, the book was widely read as *being* that which it purports to attack: entirely a product of the (misogynist, consumerist) discourses of late-capitalism which it only *pretends* to undermine. Accordingly no recent novel's release generated more controversy than that which accompanied the publication of *American Psycho*.⁷

the video crew" (Ellis 157).

⁷ Four months before the publishing date (after the novel had already been dropped by its original publisher), Tammy Bruce, the president of the National Organization of Women's (NOW) Los Angeles Branch, called for a boycott of *American Psycho*, which she deemed a "how-to-book for the torture and murder of women." These comments participated in a media frenzy that continued to escalate until the book's release, when critical reactions were similarly extreme. *Washington Post* reviewer Jonathon Yardley summarily dismissed the novel as "pure trash, as scummy and mean as anything it depicts: a dirty book by a dirty writer" (Yardley 3). Repeating the recurring accusation that *American Psycho* is in itself an act of violence against women, Pico Iyer noted in *Time* that "it is painfully easy to see the damage such a book can do to the way in which men see, and therefore treat, women" (Iyer 94). Similarly, *Newsweek*'s Peter Plagens denounced it as "base, misogynous, and dangerous" (Plagens 59). For a thorough review of critical responses to *American Psycho*, see Chapter 4 of *Novel Controversies: Public Discussions of Censorship and Social Change*, an exhaustive study by Rosa A. Eberly, or Julian Murphet's *Bret Easton Ellis's 'American Psycho': A Reader's Guide* (65-72).

Although almost all of Ellis's critics recognised the concerns that are at play in *American Psycho*,⁸ most have argued that his text works precisely in opposition to its intended project. However, although most suggest that there is no critical distance *between American Psycho* and the unpleasant episodes it depicts, it can be argued as a radical critique of *precisely* those same elements they found so abhorrent, and at the same moments. In their complaints about the novelist's perceived inability to create genuine characters with rich internal lives, many critics failed to appreciate the ways in which Ellis has articulated a distinctly contemporary view of the self, one wholly constituted by, and a symbol of, the disturbing discourses of its time. So, why then did critics fail to acknowledge that Ellis was wholly critiquing Bateman's behaviour, that he was aligning late-capitalism with sadism and psychosis and denouncing them wholesale, rather than *endorsing* the violent mutilation of women? As with the subversive defamiliarizations discussed in the body of this dissertation, it may well be the case that the (necessarily) unusual way in which *American Psycho*'s critique unfolds did not easily lend itself to sustained analysis of its political interests. Because all of these texts were controversial for various different reasons, it may also be the case that their often sensational content prevented them from receiving this kind of analytic attention. The explanations for these responses are numerous, but in this particular case may be explained by Ellis's structural and thematic use of intertextuality and his apocalyptic positing of a purely late-capitalist

⁸ For instance, while emphasising his failure to do so, Terry Teachout acknowledged that "Ellis's all-too-obvious purpose was to write a scathing satire of Eightie's materialism" (Teachout 44).

subjectivity.

The story of Patrick Bateman, a New York yuppie serial killer unfolds in a series of very short often completely disconnected chapters that mimic the style of a magazine.⁹ Often wildly different in content, the reader is repeatedly and jarringly thrown from excruciating protracted rape/murder scenes to chapters dealing exclusively with specific consumer items. This correlation ultimately blurs the line between consumption of products and the commodification of bodies that enables people to be (at times, literally) consumed by anyone with the money to afford it. It is a world in which we are all products and are treated/consumed as such. The most bizarre examples of this device are found in the entire chapters that are constituted by music reviews, generally following moments of appalling violence. Ellis describes the frantic, mechanical, and terrifying assaults in the way Patrick sees them, as analogous to the violent pornographic films that he likes to watch. In Ellis's critique, every sphere has been pervaded by the logic of late-capitalism. Patrick repeatedly describes his victims as objects, as meat, and accordingly does not even seem to *understand* why he should feel remorse for their suffering. In his critique Christopher Lehmann-Haupt suggests that "Mr. Ellis's true offense is to imply that the human mind has grown so corrupt that it can no longer distinguish between form and content," (18) and in this he is precisely correct. Bateman, and indeed everyone in the novel and *including* the novel, is unable to separate the two.

⁹ A similar strategy is found in Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters*, which loosely uses the format of a fashion magazine in an attempt to critique the image-obsession which he feels has a corrosive effect on our culture.

Perversely, if he makes any distinction between people and products, the latter is privileged. The extent to which brand-name products have greater value and identity than people for Patrick is most horribly apparent in scenes when the two are directly juxtaposed, when he is using one as he destroys the other. After raping and torturing a significantly nameless prostitute with a deluxe *Black and Decker* nail-gun, he positions

the body in front of the new Toshiba television set and in the VCR is an old tape and appearing on the screen is the last girl I filmed. I'm wearing a Joseph Abboud suit, a tie by Paul Stuart, shoes by J. Crew, a vest by someone Italian and I'm kneeling on the floor beside a corpse, eating the girl's brain, gobbling it down, spreading Grey Poupon over hunks of the pink, fleshy meat.
(Ellis 327-328)

When he describes objects he has purchased, he merely repeats things he has read in a tone modulated to suit that which he is describing, offering either the information provided by the manufacturer or passing off the opinions of reviewers as his own. Consider, as a contrast to the above scene, the way he speaks in the chapter devoted entirely to his warm feelings about the music of Whitney Houston. He states that her sentimental "The Greatest Love of All" is "one of the best, most powerful songs ever written about self-preservation and dignity," (254) adding "Whitney sings with a grandeur that approaches the sublime. Its universal message crosses all boundaries and instils one with the hope that it's not too late for us to better ourselves, to act kinder." (254)

The first-person narration which Ellis uses to tell Patrick Bateman's story achieves precisely the opposite of what this technique normally does. After spending about 400 pages within the unpleasant landscape of this yuppie's psyche, we know

virtually nothing about him. However, rather than attribute this strangeness to Ellis's inability to create "real" or "authentic" characters (as many reviewers did) we should read this unsettling flatness in the way that the text demands, as a profoundly disturbing critique of a certain contemporary mind set. Jonathon Yardley, for instance, complained that "not a single one of his characters is interesting, distinctive or sympathetic: all dissolve into a blur of mere names that, like the brand names, are both interchangeable and indistinguishable" (Yardley 3). If Ellis's narrative does not facilitate any kind of conventional character development, it is because his characters are fundamentally devoid of any identity in the traditionally imagined sense. While this may occasionally make for some perversely frustrating repetition, it is nonetheless a technically necessary attempt to create the kind of world which would be populated by people like—and *only* people like—Patrick Bateman.

American Psycho is replete with a proliferation of references to signifiers of enormous material wealth. Like that of all his friends, Bateman's conspicuous consumption is seemingly limitless and their reason for existing. He and his yuppie cohorts all wear the same clothes, eat the same obscure dishes in the same upscale restaurants, and, as far as we know, are all motivated by the same desires. Like Victor Ward, Bateman and his companions have in place of identity an encyclopaedic knowledge of the rules of their existence. It becomes quickly apparent that his group all come by this detailed and esoteric knowledge from the same outlets, and the most important of these sources accounts for the seeming absence of critical distance between

the novel and that which it depicts.

Although *American Psycho* contains mentions of seemingly countless cultural texts (slasher films, television shows, novels, restaurant guides and so forth), the frequent allusions to *GQ* magazine are the most provocative. In both form and content, the novel often appears to be a dramatisation of the popular men's magazine.¹⁰ Patrick Bateman is the *GQ* man, a simulacrum of the consumerist masculine ideal that is both the target audience of *GQ* and the product that it is selling. He is in perfect physical condition, terribly strong, unusually handsome, and meticulously well kept. He is extraordinarily wealthy, ruthless, and powerful; easily able to purchase any of the seemingly infinite number of objects he desires. If we are to believe the messages sent to us through the white noise of popular culture and the mass media, he is very much living the American dream that *we all desire*.

Although not exclusively, *GQ* is known primarily for its' high-end fashion content. Not only does each issue of the magazine feature hundreds of pages of advertisements for various designer labels, but it also contains photo spreads which are essentially inseparable from the commercial placements. The models occupy a fantasised and flawless world in which people are extraneous other than as immaculate bodies upon

¹⁰ In interviews, Ellis has been quite candid about how indebted he was to various media outlets for help with the construction of his book, particularly *GQ*, about which he states "*GQ* was inordinately helpful in costuming the characters in the book. They should have gotten credit" (Love 49). When one considers the extent to which the landscape of *American Psycho* is populated by characters who are *nothing but* the sum total of their costumes and possessions, the great influence of the magazine begins to come into focus.

which, and ultimately to whom, clothes are sold. They live in the same world as Bateman, a place in which “Individuality (is) no longer an issue....Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in” (375). Every publication also features a ‘Where to Buy it’ section enabling the desirous reader to purchase the featured clothes at various upscale stores. As the cover frequently proclaims, this product information enables the magazine’s reader to ‘look very *GQ*’. Patrick Bateman looks, and *is*, very *GQ*. He possesses the requisite sculpted physique and astronomical salary needed to become a vision of stylized beauty, to place himself inconspicuously on the magazine’s pages. Furthermore, the world *as he sees it* (which is the text of *American Psycho*) is constructed to resemble a *GQ* fashion layout.

It becomes immediately apparent that Ellis is using various defamiliarizing techniques *ad nauseam* to accomplish this goal, a fact that was not lost on the many critics who cited this as one of the reasons that they found the novel to be such a shallow read. Peter Plagens, for instance, complained about the “almost trance-inducing mantra of brand names; every character, right to the bitter end of the book when the point has been made a hundred times over, is introduced, item by item, by his or her designer clothes and accoutrements” (Plagens 59). Each character’s impeccable appearance is unrelentingly described down to the most pointlessly specific details, from the novel’s opening when Bateman’s friend:

asks without looking over, “Why aren’t you wearing the navy blue blazer with the gray pants?” Price is wearing a six-button wool and silk suit by Ermenegildo Zegna, a cotton shirt with French cuffs by Ike Behar, a Ralph Lauren silk tie and leather wing tips by Fratelli Rosetti. (Ellis 4-5)

While this arduously descriptive technique initially possesses a quirky appeal, it quickly becomes both comically excessive and excessively annoying. What is most bizarre about this listing is that it is not descriptive in any normal literary sense of the term, as we are unable to visualise any of the characters. As in the *GQ* fashion layouts, what the clothes *mean* (as symbols signified by designer labels) is far more important than how they look. And, of course, we do not know anything about the man inside the suit. He is irrelevant, a non-entity beyond the fetishized products he consumes.¹¹ The relentlessness with which Ellis repeatedly directs us to view the relationship between products and people, however tedious, is necessary if we are to consider the ways in which our own consumer practices and desires are inspired by the same dubious and in some ways ridiculous logic.

Like the magazine, Bateman's exotic and extensive consumption habits extend well beyond the clothes he wears. Every aspect of his consumerist life is related to us in the same flat arduous style, emphasising surface perfection and the ways to achieve it. It is not enough for Bateman to simply dress like a *GQ* man: he relentlessly attempts to make his entire world 'very *GQ*', a fact which is

¹¹ See *Epistemic Structuralism in the Postmodern Novel: The Examples of William Gaddis, J.G. Ballard, and Bret Easton Ellis* by Stephen Busonic for a more comprehensive analysis of Ellis's use of brand names. Busonic, who rightly views the text as a Marxist critique of capitalism, provides an engaged reading of the novel in order to "explicate the operations of epistemic structuralism in the consumerist environment that *American Psycho* depicts and to account for the gruesome connection it makes between sadism and consumer culture" (Busonic 225).

intimately related to his pathological hatred of those who would be out of place within its pages. Although largely oblivious to any element of life which exists beyond the rigidly enforced boundaries of their immediate surroundings, he and his friends share a similar hatred of those *most* outside their ideological group—the homeless, artistic, homosexuals, and so forth.¹² The landscape of his daily life is recounted in a style that is unmistakably reminiscent of *GQ*, with a complete emphasis on surface detail related in a “how-to” style that serves the pedagogical function of allowing the reader to replicate his affluent lifestyle.¹³

Furthermore, our hero seemingly possesses depths of knowledge about a diverse range of lifestyle topics from the distinct flavours of bottled water to Caribbean vacations, from the best abdominal workouts to the legality of designer label switching, and from the most obscure fusion cuisine to the most popular ‘Genesis’ albums. Indeed, Bateman is such a fountain of information about the best (the “right”) way to live one’s life that even his similarly well-informed friends come to him for advice about the issues that trouble

¹² Indeed, a good portion of the homicidal rage he directs at the less fortunate members of society stems from the fact that they are not as well versed as he in the daily rules of late-capitalist life. Attempts by the less knowing to try to understand his world particularly disgust him, as when he notices a prostitute that he is about to torture flipping “through an issue of *GQ* that’s three months old... looking confused, like she doesn’t understand something, anything. I’m thinking, Pray, you bitch, just pray” (Ellis 301).

¹³ In this respect, *American Psycho* approaches its critique of consumer culture from precisely the opposite direction to *Fight Club*. The former is satirically preoccupied with teaching the reader how to embody a consumerist lifestyle, whereas the latter is equally detailed and practical in its pedagogical attempt to offer advice about how to launch an anarchic attack on that culture. Whereas Ellis tells us which restaurants to eat at and which products will help make us perfect, Palahniuk explains how to make bombs in order to blow them up.

them. They interrogate him with such pressing issues as “Is it proper to wear tasseled loafers with a business suit or not?” (31).¹⁴ This is not only a badge of honour for Bateman, but it is also perhaps the only thing that even nominally distinguishes him from his peers. He is *better* at personifying late-capitalist fantasies of consumerist perfection than they are, infinitesimally closer to their ideal of the *GQ* man.

As well as his ability to memorise entire issues of *GQ*, he is also able to effortlessly quote *verbatim* lengthy passages from Bruce Boyer’s *Elegance: A Guide to Quality in Menswear*, *Zagats* and *New York Times*’ restaurant reviews. Accordingly, he is always the first to know when a “hip” club has passed its expiry date (generally weeks or, occasionally, months). In one of the rare moments when he displays any emotion other than hatred, a drunken friend gushes that “Girls dig Bateman... He’s *GQ*. You’re *total GQ*, Bateman” (90) to which our visibly moved hero responds “‘Thanks guy, but...’ I can’t tell if he’s being sarcastic but it makes me feel proud in a way and I try to downplay my good looks” (90). Contrarily, he despises his younger brother, Sean, who seems to be *even better* at being a yuppie than Patrick. When he discovers that Sean has access to an ultra-exclusive club he becomes outraged, squeezing his “hand into a fist so tightly that I break the skin on the palm of my hand and the biceps of my left arm bulges then rips through the cloth of the linen Armani shirt I have on” (226).

Of course, it must be emphasized that Bateman is only slightly more *GQ* than his friends, a difference so minuscule in fact that it would be imperceptible to

¹⁴ When he does not immediately answer, they threaten, “Bateman: we’re sending these

anyone who was not already very *GQ* to begin with. As in *Glamorama*, many of *American Psycho*'s funniest scenes stem from the fact that our hero and his friends are all so similar. Since they all look, dress and act equally 'perfectly,' they are all routinely mistaken for one another to the extent that they are surreally unable to distinguish between even their closest friends or lovers. The prolonged use of this de-individuating technique begins in an early scene where Patrick is (not unusually) attempting to persuade his girlfriend Evelyn to begin dating his best friend. When they are in bed together, he characteristically suggests:

"Why don't you just go for Price" "Oh god, Patrick," she says, her eyes shut. "Why Price? *Price*?" And she says this in a way that makes me think she has had sex with him.

"He's rich," I say.

"*Everybody's* rich," she says, concentrating on the TV screen.

"He's good-looking," I tell her.

"*Everybody's* good-looking, Patrick," she says remotely.

"He has a great body," I say.

"*Everybody* has a great body now," she says. (23)

Regardless of the fact that Patrick views both himself and his girlfriend as completely interchangeable with any of their identical friends, this conversation establishes the logic that underscores the rest of the novel. Unsurprisingly, neither Patrick nor any of his replicants are remotely concerned that they are completely devoid of a unique identity. It is more properly something that they gladly accept as a kind of compliment to how good they are at playing the role of masters of the consumer universe.

Furthermore, as all of Bateman's clique are shown to be precisely the same as he

questions in to *GQ*" (31).

is, there is a disturbing possibility that his homicidal behaviour is neither abhorrent nor aberrant to them. The question which becomes increasingly intriguing as one progresses through the novel is not ‘Why is Patrick doing these things?’ but ‘Is Patrick *the only one* doing these things?’ Perversely, all indications are that most of his friends are rapists and murderers also, precisely because we have not been given any reason to believe that they aren’t. Their viciously misogynistic conversations suggest that our hero’s pathological hatred of women (and every minority) is by no means uncharacteristic of his colleagues’ appalling mindsets. Indeed, on several occasions he openly confesses to various acts of barbarism and is, in some of the novel’s most blackly hilarious moments, completely ignored, misunderstood, or summarily dismissed.

Not only does his similarity to the army of *GQ* men he calls his friends not interfere with his homicidal behaviour, but they *literally* enable him to get away with murder. The protection provided by his wealth in an American justice system that is notoriously slanted in favour of the rich is complemented by the near anonymity that is also (albeit less overtly) a function of his cultural status. When Detective Kimball visits regarding the disappearance of Paul Owen—a friend and colleague he recently murdered with an axe—Bateman’s only concern is not that he will be caught but that the detective is “my age, wearing a linen Armani suit not unlike mine, though his is slightly dishevelled in a hip way, which worries me” (267). Despite this seemingly misplaced sense of anxiety, it becomes quickly apparent that the detective is one of the boys and, accordingly, that Bateman has nothing to fear. After a fruitless interrogation during which

Bateman attempts to describe his absent friend and responds "He... ate a balanced diet" (271), the two men discuss "razor-burn balms and tattersall shirts" (277). Kimball clearly understands the conflation of identities that will not make his task any easier, having already heard one report that Owen has been seen in London but that his identity could not be absolutely confirmed even by the close friend who allegedly spotted him. The surrealism of this problem becomes increasingly heightened as numerous Owen sightings are disseminated throughout the rest of the novel. After having confessed all of his crimes onto the answering machine of his friend Carnes, Patrick bumps into him at a club and can not convince him that what he said was the truth. Carnes (who believes Bateman is someone named Davis and begins to speak badly of him *in absentia*) angers him and Patrick reiterates "Listen to me. Listen very, very carefully. I-killed-Paul-Owen-and-I-liked-it. I can't make myself any clearer" (388). Still unable to be believed, Bateman asks:

"Why not?" I shout again over the music, though there's really no need to, adding, "You stupid bastard."

He stares at me as if we are both underwater and shouts back, very clearly over the din of the club, "Because... I had ... dinner ... with Paul Owen ... twice ...in London... *just ten days ago.*"

After we stare at each other for what seems like a minute, I finally have the nerve to say something back to him but my voice lacks any authority and I'm not sure if I believe myself when I tell him, simply, "No, you ... didn't." But it comes out a question, not a statement. (388)

He is able to murder others from his clique because they are essentially the same person and are, therefore, eminently replaceable and interchangeable.

Bateman's enormous wealth literally permits him to fulfil what he believes is his

earned right, which is “to be allowed to do exactly what we *want* to do” (74). As he repeatedly states “this is the way my world works” (77,328,399). The horrifying logic of this culture is apparent when, at a club, it dawns on him that he knows one of the group of women with which he is spending the evening:

I recognize Alison as a girl I did last spring while at the Kentucky Derby with Evelyn and her parents. I remember she screamed when I tried to push my entire arm, gloved and slathered with Vaseline, toothpaste, anything I could find, up into her vagina. She was drunk, wasted on coke, and I had tied her up with wire, slapped duct tape all over her mouth, her face, her breasts.... I suddenly remember, painfully, that I would have liked to see Alison bleed to death that afternoon last spring but something stopped me. She was so high- “oh my god,” she kept moaning during those hours, blood bubbling out of her nose- she never wept. Maybe that was the problem; maybe that was what saved her. I won a lot of money that weekend on a horse called Indecent Exposure.

“Well ... Hi.” I smile weakly but soon regain my confidence. Alison would never have told anyone that story. Not a soul could’ve possibly heard about that lovely, horrible afternoon. I grin at her in the darkness of Nell’s. “Yeah, I remember you. You were a real ...” I pause, then growl, “manhandler.”

She says nothing, just looks at me like I’m the opposite of civilisation or something. (207-208)

Patrick’s indignation at the poor reception that his innuendo generates is, in the perverse world of the novel, entirely justifiable. He *is*, after all, the *GQ* man. He is precisely *not* the “opposite of civilisation” but rather the logical extension of late-capitalist subjectivity, the mad pinnacle of what his civilisation can produce. Many reviewers, like Roger Kimball, felt that the oppressive feeling the text generates is because “*American Psycho* is utterly unredeemed by moral sensibility or critical distance” (Kimball 7) and found the novel wanting because it lacked a moral framework

that would explicitly critique Patrick's actions. However, Ellis finds no space for self-criticism within a culture as unreflective and cruel as the one his protagonist resides in, one obsessed with consumption, surfaces, objects. Because Patrick controls the narrative, we can have no soothing authorial interventions to denounce his reprehensible conduct.¹⁵

There are no organisations diligently and earnestly pursuing him, and even when Ellis teasingly allows us to believe that the reign of terror may come to an end, he inevitably escapes (significantly) into the refuge of his corporate office. Since the violence in *American Psycho* is shown to be intimately involved with, and a product of, the mechanics of late-capitalist culture and because it is so surreally excessive, its status in the text as the logical extension of Bateman's lifestyle, can *only be* critical. Ultimately, the novel in its entirety is the reason why Bateman does what he does: its terrible violence *is* the critique, rather than the thing which must be critiqued, since it is here that the dehumanizing features of consumer culture are most explicitly defamiliarized. Bateman is an anomaly not because he is motivated by impulses that are alien to us, but because he is *totally* a product of the texts that constitute his (and *our*) culture, a character for whom (to paraphrase Derrida) there is nothing outside of discourse. The revulsion his cool insanity must inspire in the reader is the novel's admittedly risky

¹⁵ Ellis further emphasises the longevity (and 'normalcy') of Bateman's behaviour by making his narrator (who also briefly appears in *Glamorama*) the elder brother of *The Rules of Attraction*'s Sean Bateman, who is also a college friend of Victor Ward's, as is Clay, *Less Than Zero*'s narrator. This textual overlap has been noted by many critics including Pagan Kennedy, who observed that "Characters between books apparently belong to the same old-boy network of nihilists.... Yoknapatawpha this isn't, but Ellis's books mark a territory and can't be considered in isolation." (Kennedy 427)

strategy for defamiliarizing our own consumptive desires, for showing the fundamental inequality and madness that characterises our contemporary hegemony.

Although all of these novels seems significantly different from those discussed in the body of this dissertation, each are subversive defamiliarizations by other means and suggest that this effect can be generated in any one of a number of creative ways. All of these texts attempt to make strange the conditions of late-capitalist hegemony by exposing and interrogating the link that inherently connects our everyday practices and attitudes with the broader political structures they sustain. Obviously, none of the subversive defamiliarizations examined here contain the remedy for what ails contemporary culture. However, by forcing us to consider the complex ways in which our own subjectivities are implicated in maintaining the present social order, and by positing our selves as the site from which resistance may best be enacted, they at least suggest that different ways of being—and a different sort of culture—remain imaginable and, therefore, possible today.

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