

'I want you to hit me as hard as you can!'

- ***A Critical Reading of Commodity Aesthetics, Decadence & Violence***

In 'American Psycho' & 'Fight Club'

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Introduction

With the origins of (neo-)Marxism people began, more than ever before, to question the society we live in and the fundamental build-up of its constituents. One of the primary inquiries was the problem of commodification and how it affected the masses in society. The theoretical work done in this context of questioning the status quo of western civilisation all but withered away 20-30 years ago, but fiction never stopped to question the quality of our lives in late capitalist society. 'Blank Generation' fiction or simply put, 'Blank Fiction' was a term coined at the end of the 20th century and it refers to urban fiction¹ from the 1980s and onward. It deals mainly with problems of the commodified and mass culture reality, plus the possible consequences of these problems.

Usually about superficiality, these stories float away from the post-World-War-II novels with their dense plots and complex structures to a construct of transparency. In a post-modern² capitalist society, these new writers of 'Blank Fiction'³ are more concerned with finding another way to describe our contemporary consumer, mass-producing late capitalism, rather than sticking to the old conventional structures. Most of the fiction produced by writers of 'Blank Fiction' is among other things concerned with the lack of morals and ethics plus the extremes of violent conduct it can lead to. Excess seems to be the key word in the materialistic urban society that is depicted in many of these novels. Indeed, all of this might indicate that 'Blank Fiction' is a school or literary movement of some sort; it is not. However, several themes can be traced through most of this fiction:

Blank fiction's relentless emphasis on brand names, popular culture and commodities, coupled with its detailed descriptions of consumerism, the reification of violence, decadence and extreme sexuality, provide the boundaries within which this study has been developed. (Annesley, James, 1998:136)

'Blank Fictions' are as diverse as are the writers. It is about, flatness, ambiguity and blankness, 'blank' signifying something, which reflects nothing, or 'an absence', e.g. an absence of both unbelievable characters and setting. This highly removes 'Blank Fiction' from any association with Realist fiction, where the mimetic contract⁴ was a priority. Having read both *American Psycho* (Ellis, Brett Easton, 1991) and *Fight Club* (Palaehniuk, Chuck, 1996) and with the previous quote in mind it is obvious that these are 'Blank Generation' fiction.

In this project the novels could be analysed in almost every fashion known to scholars of literary or cultural studies, from a post-modern/post-structuralist point of view to a sociological insight into culture or even to a psychoanalytical analysis of the people depicted in these stories of metropolitan

¹ Predominantly American urbanism.

² To the context of this project, it is assumed that we live in the post-modern period, disregarding for the purpose of limitation the dispute: Modernism vs. Postmodernism.

³ Brett Easton Ellis, Chuck Palaehniuk and Lynne Tillman to name but a few.

⁴ An Aristotelian concept of fiction being a one to one representation of reality. There is a correlation to the 'real' world in 'Blank Fiction', but it is commodified.

deviancies. However, in this project it has been decided to focus on a (neo-)Marxist's point of view. From a Marxist view, Capitalism's obsession with 'things', with commodities, has had an enormous impact on the contemporary Western culture. Wolfgang Fritz Haug's '*A Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*' is central to this issue because in this he is focusing on power in capitalist society.⁵ This power '...has to be understood in terms of the centrality of commodification' (Giddens, Anthony (ed.), 1995: 17).

It has been decided to focus on Haug's theory of capitalist society's (mis-)use of commodity aesthetics because it seems to be in some way affecting the decadent and violent actions of Bateman, the main character in '*American Psycho*'. At first glance, this novel and in fact the whole of the social stratum which the protagonist occupies, is shown to be nothing short of aesthetic and ethical depravity incarnated; there is nothing but greed, sexual excess, narcotics, twisted commodification and violence in it.

All in all, it would not seem '*American Psycho*' offers any solution to these problems. '*Fight Club*', on the contrary, on first glance, appears to offer an alternative to the preoccupation with commodities in contemporary Western society. However, it is still unclear as to what extent the alternative is a sign of progress and to what extent it differs from '*American Psycho*'s preoccupation with violence and decadence in the end. Due to the theoretical and analytical diversity of the themes discussed so far, one could without a doubt come up with a whole catalogue of interesting essays. Only, owing to the limitations of this project it has been decided to compare the main views on society, delineated in the two previously mentioned novels, to each other on a basis of a three-part theory of contemporary Western society.

Firstly, we can ask three questions:

- What is commodity aesthetics in W.F. Haug's view?
- Why is violence such an issue in contemporary western society?
- What is decadent about contemporary Western society?
- Secondly, and more importantly, we can put this knowledge to use:
 - **How are the problems of commodification, violence and decadence voiced in '*American Psycho*'?**
 - **Does '*Fight Club*' offer any alternative to the problems of commodification, decadence and violence in '*American Psycho*' or does it only further complicate matters?**

⁵ Other members of the Frankfurt School, an important and influential group of (neo-)Marxists founded after WWI which included such theorists as Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Habermas a.o. wrote on similar subjects, however, Haug's analyses remain the best for the function of this project.

Theory

Commodity Aesthetics

In the 1971 work by Wolfgang Fritz Haug entitled *Kritik der Wahrenästhetik* (English title *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*) he starts out by all but rejecting some of his former ideas for critical analysis of commodification in capitalist society:

The intention is not to offer yet another condemnation of advertising manipulation and the like...Such theories remain in part caught up in surface appearance, which they use to make into absolute assertions about the nature of society...It is perhaps worth mentioning in this context my own essay 'Zur Ästhetik von Manipulation' ['On the Aesthetics of Manipulation'], in which these mistakes are apparent. (Haug, Wolfgang Fritz, 1971: 5)⁶

By doing this, Haug is building up to the current essay we are reading, and therefore the credibility of *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics* is heightened. He also goes on to explain how he was urged to write the book by his colleagues at the Frankfurt School and even though other members of the Frankfurt School have touched upon the same themes as Haug, his work on commodity aesthetics in contemporary Western capitalist society still remains one of the most renowned works of the latter part of the 20th century. In this chapter, I shall briefly remark on the history of commodities in Western society and touch upon the act of commodity transaction and its development from pre-monetary to a monetary society.

Over the centuries, both the role and look of commodities have changed. According to Haug⁷, some criteria existed, in the pre-monetary society, before a transaction of commodities between two people could be accomplished: 'Commodity exchange is an exchange of alienable objects between people who are in a state of reciprocal independence that establishes a quantitative relation between the objects transacted' (Frow, John, 1997: 121)

According to Haug, the two persons involved in the exchange first of all had to have different commodities, it made no sense to talk about switching two commodities of the same 'nature'.⁸ Second of all, both involved had to be able to spare the object, the commodity that they each possessed, and last of all, they had to have a need for the use-value of the other's commodity. Quite early, though, people realised that on a wider scale exchange of commodities in general posed a problem, because the only way for any commodity to express its own value was in an exchange

⁶ However, Haug does not fully reject *Zur Ästhetik von Manipulation* as he goes on to point out its strengths and advantages as an analytical tool.

⁷ And Chris Gregory as it is seen from the following quote by John Frow.

⁸ I.e. a spade for another spade or a duck for another duck.

relationship with another commodity. Consequently, if every commodity's value could only be expressed through comparison to another commodity, each type, quantity and quality of commodities had to related to each other, an arduous, if not impossible, job.

With the advent of money, this complication dissolved. Monetary units entered as a third commodity in the exchange relationship. According to Haug, money became a double factor in the world of commodity exchange:

On the one hand, it functions as an expression of value, thus making different things comparable and measurable... On the other hand, since the exchange-value of each commodity has an independent monetary form, money separates the too-complex process of commodity-exchange into two acts "by splitting up the direct identity present in this case between the exchange of one's own product and the acquisition of someone else's into the two antithetical segments of sale and purchase."⁹ (Haug: 14)

Money became the mediator in the hitherto unmediated process of commodity transaction. Money had become the exchange value on which all trade was based. If you had money, you had power, the power to acquire any commodity only limited by the means at your disposal.

In capitalist society the process of commodity exchange is changed, Haug argues. To the commodity manufacturer in a capitalistic society, it is no longer about the use-value of a commodity but about its appearance, whether it is appealing aesthetically to the consumer or not. To the buyer/consumer it is only about the prospects of the commodity's use-value. To Haug, capitalism often distorts the image of the commodity, making the real use-value illusory to the buyer:

The aesthetics of the commodity in its widest meaning – the sensual appearance and the conception of its use-value – become detached from the object itself. Appearance becomes just as important – and practically more so – than the commodity's being itself. Something that is simply useful but does not appear to be so, will not sell, while something that seems to be useful, will sell. (17)

Thus, the manufacturers can use the sensually pleasing aesthetics of a commodity as a tool in accumulating money. By altering the taste, size, amount etc. a commodity manufacturer can easily lower the cost of producing a certain commodity. However, to keep, or raise, their number of buyers, you have blur the image, the use-value of the commodity, make it appear more appealing to the buyer, hence giving a false promise of its use-value.¹⁰ Haug gives an example of lowering the quality and cost of production of a commodity, namely spirits:

⁹ Haug is here quoting Marx in 'Das Kapital', Vol. I, page 209. Important here is the economic Marxist theory of 'surplus value' which is the difference between the production value and the value of work force reproduction. I.e. when the worker has produced enough value to earn his pay, the rest of the value goes to his employer (the Capitalist) in the form of 'surplus value'. (Hansen, Carsten Svane, Hansen, Peter Nørbæk, Qvist, Palle, 1997: 236) Needless to say, Marxism finds this one of the greatest evils of a capitalist society.

¹⁰ E.g through advertising.

Brandy, instead of deriving its brownish colour from maturing in oak casks for years, is tinted with caramels to maintain its appearance...Prussian brandy, incidentally, contributed greatly to the brutalization and the dulling of the senses among the working class owing to its high content of fusel oil. (23)

Haug could easily be criticised for exemplifying and dramatising, due to his influence of Marxism, but it is still a valid example of how commodities' use-value can be corrupted and exploited. As long as the appearance of a commodity can appeal sensually to the public the manufacturer has nothing to worry about, his commodity will assuredly sell. The invention of brand name commodities helped the commodity producer to this end. The idea of creating a brand name is to further give the commodity an image, an aesthetic sensual illusion of its use-value pleasing to the eye, that is unique and in the end to create a monopoly on the market for the product. According to Haug, this is a complicated affair, because it '...throws light on the close relationship between promotional commodity styling and the counterfeiting of commodities.' (27) What is also interesting about brand names is that people often say the brand name when referring to the commodity instead of 'saying' the name of the commodity itself¹¹, e.g. saying 'a Nilfisk' instead of 'a vacuum cleaner', 'Kleenex' instead of 'handkerchief', 'Cadillac' instead of 'Car'.

No longer do people care about the use-value as much as the image of it, the latter which is only created to appeal sensually stimulatingly to the consumer, in order for the consumer to 'want it'. When put to the extreme, this 'wanting'/'lusting' can lead to an offensive action, namely shoplifting. Because, shoplifting, in Freudian terms, can be compared to raping or at least 'wanting' or 'lusting'. The desire to possess an object, a commodity, can be so great because of the distorted image of its sensual use-value appealing aesthetically to the consumer, that they are 'forced' to steal it, if they do not possess the capital to buy it. It becomes a kind of 'raping' if you consider the fact that the thief is taking advantage of a sensual object without its (or its manufacturer's) 'consent'. In correlation to this, Haug states:

...people steal for exactly the same reasons as they would normally buy..."both buyer and thief"¹² succumb to the same impulses...[because of] "the tendency in modern commodity presentation to make the offers so seductive that a spontaneous compulsion to purchase arises."¹³ (38)

So, according to Haug, the goal of commodity aesthetics, the moulding of the sensual image of a commodity, hence the moulding of the buyer's illusory needs, is fundamental in capitalist society. All in all Haug thinks that the goal of commodity aesthetics in contemporary western capitalist society is to create a world of commodities that all appear sensual and beautiful, in order for the commodities to be bought by the manipulated consumers. 'Any other world, different from that

¹¹ Usually denoted by its real use-value

¹² Quote from De Boor

provided by the commodities, is almost no longer accessible to them...Prostitution remains on the level of simple commodity production...with the pimp as capitalist agent, and the brothel as factory.’ (52&55) Even sexual experiences can be commodified in this ‘War of Illusions’. Moreover, it adds to the sensual/sexual character of commodities by making us think about how buying certain commodities have the goal of making ourselves appear more sensual/sexual.¹⁴ In the end, it is difficult if not futile to deny any connection between commodities and sensuality in a capitalist society.

Haug writes further about the corruption of use-value turning into corrupting use-value. Corrupting use-value could lead to a kind of emotional ‘amputation’. Even though Haug, among other things, sets out to describe some political/economical conflicts in capitalist society, most of his theories lead to sensual/sexual characteristic of commodities, and its ‘amputation’ of pathos can be seen as merely building on the psychoanalysis theory of Sigmund Freud. In the end Haug’s theory does shed light on important factors in the world of commodities and manipulated consumers.

The Decadent

Near the end of the 19th century a group arose in France who called itself ‘the Decadence’. They were inspired by art from ancient Greece and Rome namely that which showed signs of beginning decay¹⁵. ‘The Decadence’¹⁶ were of the opinion that the French Empire was in such a decadent situation in that period. ‘This period is also known as the **fin de siècle** (end of the century); the phrase connotes the lassitude, satiety, and ennui expressed by many writers of the Decadence.’ (Abrams, M.H., 1993, p. 43) These writers were very often ‘bohemians’ living a peripheral life in society.¹⁷

In these fin de siècle narratives the protagonist often withdrew from society in order to find something extraordinary beyond reality. Due to the immense changes in society (shifts in gender roles, economic basis, political environment, colonial powers and capitalism) these writers employed a decadent aesthetics to define and cope with the oscillations in society. In doing so they rejected the material world. Nevertheless, the material world of commodities remained at the heart of these narratives of seeming ‘flight from reality’ scenarios, because no matter how much they tried to escape they were often still dependent upon that which they tried to flee, the commercialised world. Nevertheless, by seeing the power that lies in the hopelessness of it all,

¹³ Quote from Victor Scheitlin.

¹⁴ E.g. Perfumes, jackets, furs, cologne, trousers, dinner suits, make up, sports cars etc.

¹⁵ Most useful, of course, was the art made in the declining periods of either empire.

¹⁶ Charles Baudelaire a.o.

¹⁷ A trait of Modernism.

some found an even deeper sense of decadence. To 'the Decadence' the consumer reality of life was an indirect factor in their escape from that society.

...The emergence of nineteenth-century decadence is interpreted as an imaginative dilemma generated by the change from market to monopoly capitalism, blank fiction is read in relation to the change from monopoly capitalism to late capitalism. (Annesley: 114-115)

As with the linkage between decadence in the 19th century fin de siècle and the shift to monopoly capitalism, the shift to late capitalism in the 20th century certainly has had an impact on the decadence of 'blank generation' fiction. Both inaugurate anxieties about uncertainties and again, the common anxiety of the two centuries can be traced. However, 'Blank Generation' fiction *does* have several traits that describe its aesthetic values without being compared to the fin de siècle writing of the late 19th century.

First of all, late capitalism is very different from monopoly capitalism and hence it influences culture in a dissimilar way. Consumerism and commodities are still at the centre of this mode of contemporary decadent thinking but this is a: '...type of decadence that seems particularly well-suited to the late capitalist period, one in which the tensions between autonomous pleasures and commodification have disappeared, leaving only consumer based pleasures in their place.' (117) A great change has occurred in capitalist culture; a shift from monopoly capitalism to late capitalism, from the 19th century to now, and mass production has had a great impact on our way of living, as John Frow writes:¹⁸ 'It is no longer possible to separate the economic or productive realm from the realms of ideology or culture, since cultural artifacts, images, representations, even feelings and psychic structures have become part of the world of the economic.' (Storey, John, 1997: 177)

Everything has been commodified: a 'remarkable' example of commodification is organ donation which turns into a business in itself with a specific use value. The reason Baudrillard believes that only commodified spheres¹⁹ exist in our contemporary society is that we have gone from a world based on things/objects/commodities to a world of information/signs. The line between commodities and culture has been rubbed away. Baudrillard also refers to 'Hyperrealism': we live in a society where we are unable to distinguish between the real and the unreal, in a mass producing society you cannot talk about possessing the original of a mass produced commodity, the object you possess has become a copy without an original.²⁰ This can be related to the world of fake use-value. Since the line between the real and the unreal is gone, the buyer cannot distinguish between the sensually appealing use-value of a commodity and its real use-value, they have become one.

¹⁸ Referring to the thoughts of Baudrillard.

¹⁹ 'Sphere' is here a metaphor for 'publicness' or 'experiences'.

²⁰ 'Simulacrum' in the words of Baudrillard.

As a result of this, the realm of un-commodified experiences has been removed in 'Blank Generation' fiction. Even natural surroundings have been commodified, usually the rural is expressed through the use of urban language²¹, which in turn makes experiences that more synthetic (Annesley). The 'blank generation' novel often does this, exemplifying the urge to transcend the urbanised reality but bound paradoxically to its inescapable commodification and consumerism. Yet, some of these novels give another view of this reality in which people cling to the commodified nature of late capitalism and have no need or will to exceed or transcend their own culture. *American Psycho* is such a novel, the characters in this novel are highly commodified and there seems to be little, if any, speculation about a world different from their own commercialised reality.

In most 'Blank Generation' fiction drugs are a valid metaphor at an attempt at achieving decadence:

...The decadent autonomy of the drug user is cancelled out by the material relations generated by his or her dedication to the product. Pleasure is commodified in a series of representations that offer a depressingly familiar sense of the ways in which commercial interests colonise these experiences. (131)

The drug as a commodity hinders what would seem to be an attempt at escaping the bonds of reality but unlike the 19th century bohemian and other fictions of the 20th century, the drug addict protagonist of 'Blank Generation' fiction rarely wants to ostracise himself from his society/reality. What is often the case is that the protagonist of 'Blank Generation' fiction ties himself even more strongly to a world of commodities by using drugs, most often cocaine²², that make the protagonist powerful in his relation to consumer society, because the drug stresses his place in society. The use of cocaine is ipso facto a mere flaunting of his excessive consumerism. Hence, decadence becomes an integrated part of the model consumer's life.

"Decadence" is thus in some way the very premonition of the postmodern itself, but under conditions that make it impossible to predict the aftermath with any sociological or cultural accuracy, thereby diverting the vague sense of a future into more fantastic forms, all born from the misfits and eccentrics, the perverts and the Others, or aliens, of the present (modern) system. (Jameson, Fredric, 1991, p. 382)

Decadence is inevitably linked to, or an integrated part of, the contemporary postmodern society. To Jameson²³, decadence is a feeling that we all register, but refrain from revealing even though it is obvious to everybody. This is something to think about, since the decadence of our society has

²¹ Or the rural is described through its apparent 'lack' of urban features and traits.

²² Unlike the late 19th century's bohemian's occupation with heroine, which led to liberation from the commodified society from which the bohemian felt estranged. Still, this was not without destructive consequences, and the bohemians paradoxically still depended on a commodity, the drug, to accomplish this escape.

²³ An American Marxist.

become so much an integrated part of our western civilisation that we no longer give it much thought, because it is so 'natural', as stated above, we no longer recognise the unreal for what it is, but confuse it with the real. John Docker remarks on our contemporary culture.

There is the unprecedented level of commodification and commodity fetishism. There are the media and advertising...Hollywood and its commodified stars like Marilyn Monroe; the breakdown of the older modernist distinction between high culture and mass or commercial art and taste...the loss of reality in images, pseudo-events and spectacles; and fundamental alterations in our experience of time and space, history and the present. (Docker, John, 1994, p. 117)

As seen above, drugs are also commodified along with everything else, and commercialism and drugs are connected in an eerie relationship. It seems that all kinds of 'pleasure' are commodified and it offers an intriguing insight into the relationship between the decadent and commodity aesthetics. The inescapable linkage between the two separates decadence in the late 20th century from that of the fin de siècle of the latter part of the 19th.²⁴ To James Annesley, decadence in our contemporary culture is not only accomplished through commodities, but is actually dependent on the commodification of late capitalism.

One of the most noteworthy philosophers who have written on decadence is Nietzsche. He believed that there was a need for the decadent in society. Matei Calinescu remarks on Nietzsche and his dialectic:

For Nietzsche, the strategy of decadence is typically that of the liar who deceives by *imitating* truth and by making his lies even more credible than truth itself. Thus, in its hatred of life, decadence masquerades as admiration of a higher life, and, because of its mastery in the art of seduction, it is able to make weakness look like force, exhaustion like fulfilment, cowardice like courage. Decadence is dangerous because it always disguises itself as its opposite. (Calinescu, Matei, 1987: 180)

...He speaks of decadence from *personal experience*, as a man who knows the value of health for having been sick and who, therefore, cannot fail to recognize the philosophical value of sickness itself, without which health would be unable to achieve self-consciousness. (179)

What most people would abhor, Nietzsche was grateful at having. Without the pain, sorrow, darkness, disintegration etc. he would not know how to appreciate their antithesis happiness, light, integration etc. What also leaps to mind is the similarity between decadence and the illusory image of a commodity's use-value. Through commodity aesthetics a commodity that perhaps has a weak use-value can appear to have a strong and drawing use-value, which in turn can lead us only to

²⁴ It ought to be stressed here that because of the different social and economical backgrounds on which they are based, the two fin de siècle periods are to this project incomparable. However, the decadent trait of the 20th century fin de siècle period remains.

think of how commodity aesthetics is a symptom of decadence. Nietzsche believed that the most important thing was to become conscious of the decadent in society, be mindful of it and avoid its deceptions and traps.

Violence and Terror

Today's western society is often characterised as being increasingly violent and violence 'consuming'. In the following section, I will highlight some interesting key points on our perception of violence and on the way violence is expressed.

The representation of violence is a source of enduring pleasure and fascination in our culture. (Crowther, Paul, 1993, p. 97)

The violent work is found pleasurable because it reflects, and thereby consolidates, male fantasies of virility, power, and control. It feeds, in other words, upon socially negative attitudes – especially towards women – which are deeply embedded in patriarchal ideology. (97)

To Crowther, our fascination with representations of violence lies in patriarchal inclinations in us to control, to dominate. However, there is a great difference between a representation of violence and real violence. A central ambiguity in most people's relation to violence is having a moral restraint in using violence, while at the same time also having the desire to exercise power and control over another. Crowther gives an excellent example of this:

Consider...the following situation. We witness an act of violence from a position in which we ourselves are not in any danger. Now, although the event may be fascinating, and although we may be powerless to intervene, most people will feel that they ought to take some action – even if only that of expressing disapproval. Simply to contemplate real violence normally leads to bouts of conscience and guilt at our inability to intervene. (104)

Many individual men and women crave power and control over others in contexts and for reasons other than sexual ones. Indeed, it does not take a repressed or incipient megalomaniac to fantasize about what it would be like to exercise power and control freed from moral, institutional and physical constraints. (105)

On one hand, we want to rule and control, if only for a single day or minute. On the other hand nevertheless, it is not unlikely that we will face incidents where we will be forced to stand helplessly by, while some kind of morally contemptible act of violence is being committed. It is probably this duality that creates a stable, balanced individual, having both options, both 'to use violence' and 'to refrain from using violence'; it is presumably what increases our sense of freedom

as individuals. However, this ambiguity of individuality could also, in a worst case scenario, be seen as a psychosis waiting to happen, a fragile schism in the self, waiting to rupture.

Overlooking the basic distinction between art and reality, too many commentators have confused the significance of representations of murder with the meaning of actual murders. What these arguments fail to appreciate is that the relationship between a literary image of violence and violence itself is at best tenuous and at worst non-existent. Violence in literature serves a complex symbolic and communicative function. (Annesley: 12)

In today's society violence is used in art constantly, whether it happens to be a book, movie or painting, and people seem to be fascinated by it. A common misperception by people is that violence seen on television is the only and direct cause of violence in society.²⁵ Moreover, people often believe that the artists who portray the violence are violent themselves.²⁶ Nothing could be further from the case, or at least it would be faulty, if not altogether futile, to deduce anything in this way. Extremely violent narratives should be analysed critically and not just be presumed to tell us something.

Violence in art, i.e. the representation of violence, could be, to an extent, considered 'un-real' or at least 'less real' than the 'real'. The visual media 'helps' in a way, to make violence 'un-real'. Violent news, series and movies are mass-produced and the more we see excessive violence on television or at the cinema, the more likely we are to distance ourselves from it, it becomes more 'un-real'. The link to Baudrillard's sense of the merging of the real with the unreal and hence with manipulated consumers of commodity aesthetics is obvious: commodity aesthetics' corrupting influence on consumers can lead to a diffuse interpretation of reality that can have unprecedented consequences.²⁷

The focus on the body's aesthetic [in our consumer society] establishes a series of links between the individual human body and the economic body. Beauty is both a received judgement on the body's appearance and a means of putting an economic valuation on that appearance...The complex functioning of the idea of beauty thus positions the body within the exchange system and provides the means through which it is transformed into a commodity. (23)

The mass consumption of violence is not the only thing attributing to an estrangement but also, some would argue, the mass consumption of sexual or beautiful commodities. Through a fixation

²⁵ In addition to this, some psychologists and sociologists think that men get their ideas of rape from watching rape on television, but there are some that believe that it deters men from raping.

²⁶ A good example of this would be *American Psycho*. Most critics believed that Ellis was in fact a violent man. People thought that it was Ellis' intention to do a how-to-manual on rape, torturing and killing of women. It was only after rigorous defences that Ellis convinced the public that he was trying to give a critical view of these aforementioned atrocities, an image of contemporary America, not facts about it. In the LA Times Chuck Palahniuk has written about similar experiences he has had regarding the aftermath of *Fight Club*'s publication: (<http://members.xoom.com/intrloper9/latimes.htm>)

²⁷ This world of reality vs. un-reality outright questions the difference or lack thereof, between representation of violence and 'real' violence.

on the aesthetic appearance of the human body, commodities of beauty enhancements can be vended, and through heavy advertisement campaigning the aesthetic appearance of one's body becomes equal to one's success and hence how much you earn. That is why the beauty industry is as big as it is, a linkage is forged between commercialism/commodification and beauty/sexuality. Violence and sex in this estranged commodified form can lead to a clouded and 'un-real' impression of reality. In a worst case scenario this commodification has a numbing effect on our perception of morality in violence.

Philosophically, violence has nearly always been interchangeably linked to terror; terror often leads to violence, and violence is in most ways considered a way of terrorising someone or something. To most, terror is a negative thing, but according to E.V. Walter, indirectly citing Montesquieu's thoughts on terror and oppression/despotism: 'The purpose of terror is tranquillity... Terror eliminates resistance, prevents disorder, and holds together an expansive area, for it is the natural disposition of a despotic government to organize vast domains.' (Wolff, Kurt H, Moore Jr., Barrington (ed.), 1968, p. 125) In this case the tool with which to eliminate any resistance, is violence. This is not to say that it is the 'best' way of removing an opposition, it could just as well be achieved with persuasive argumentation and political lobbying, but what is meant here is that an oppressive system/'leader'/government only uses violence/terror as its main weapon. Indeed, through history it has shown itself to be a powerful weapon. Fear, rather than kindness, has often been employed to procure reverence, and even though mankind as a rule detest violence and limits to freedom and cherish their fundamental rights as human beings, they often will not act against a despotic leader, because such a system is very easy to live in as well as maintain and uphold. This could easily be compared to a capitalist society in which commodity aesthetics governs, an oppressive system in which it is easy to live sanguine and oblivious. '...Even though Montesquieu argued that only in a despotism is terror consistent with the political structure, it might appear briefly from time to time in the history of other systems.' (129) So, even though our contemporary society may or may not be thought of as a despotic rule, we still sometimes face the fact that terror/violence is utilised.

A 'Theoretical' Conclusion

To sum up, we can conclude that there seems to be a clear connection between violence/terror, decadence and commodity aesthetics. The corrupting influence of commodity aesthetics and the entire mass society is a symptom of the decadent state of the western world. Terror and violence is implemented in a world where the decadent freely roams, and both are also employed to maintain such a society. Commodification of everything is further evidence of this and the decadent feeling is heightened when one considers the 'un-real-ness' of Baudrillard's 'Hyperrealism', which can again be related to the world of fake use-value where people are fooled into buying what they

believe to be sensually aesthetic commodities but in reality are nothing more than decadent illusions, behind which lies a shadow of its former use-value. Commodity fetishism has a two-way relationship to decadence and violence/terror through shoplifting, taking advantage of an aesthetically sensual object. Through a commodification of violence, the effects of late capitalism has induced an 'un-real-ness' in us regarding violence, and people become more and more insensitive to representations of violence because of this. Our perception of morals with regards to violence is altered to a state of degeneracy, of decadence.

American Psycho

In 1991 *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis was released in a great furore. Despite the fact that only a minority of the pages actually depict killing itself, most critics condemned it as a 'how-to' manual on raping and mutilating women. Others just saw it as morally repulsive, and it was only a minority of critics who even offered an infinitesimal look into the text instead of the context of the novel. Nearly everyone²⁸ were concerned with blaming Ellis for having the same thoughts as Patrick Bateman (the lead character in the novel) and in the end being a sadistic woman hater himself. Ellis tried to defend himself and it was only years after he seemed to be recognised as an excellent, intelligent and 'non-psychotic' novelist.

In this chapter there will be a short presentation of the main themes of the novel. Secondly, a delineation of the features of commodity aesthetics, decadence and violence in the text based on the preceding theory in chapters 2, 3 and 4.²⁹ Lastly, a conclusion on these findings will be given.

American Psycho starts out in the first chapter by running through the main themes of the book. We meet the protagonist who, as with the rest of the characters in the book, is described only through the clothes he is wearing, what objects he owns and what food he is eating.³⁰ Then, we hear about how these **Young Urban Professionals**³¹ despise the homeless, the dispossessed and artists who have no care for the 'true' values of life, among those values: commodity fetishism. Artists are disdained because to the yuppies they lead an old, vapid and colourless lifestyle in comparison with their own yuppie life:

This is up-town, this is the modern world, the adult world – money, status, pragmatism, skills, market-value...[which is ipso facto]...An amoral world, a status-driven, food-obsessed world, a world of interchangeable people, a misogynistic world despite its apparent equal opportunities for women and finally a brutal, violent and terrified world. (Young, Elizabeth, Caveney, Graham, 1992: 99)

Commodification and Commodity Aesthetics

Commodity aesthetics is without a doubt a central theme in *American Psycho*. Throughout the novel, commodities are not referred to by their use-value, but by the brand name of the commodity and these are often designer names such as Versace, Manolo Blahnik, Giorgio Armani, J&B, Finlandia, Absolut, Wendy Gell, Anne Klein etc. Every commodity possessed by these 'elitists' has

²⁸ Feminists to a greater extent.

²⁹ A disclosure of how this is inter-linked in the novel will be included in these delineations.

³⁰ Indeed, all the characters look exactly the same because they all need to wear the best of everything. As we find out later in the novel, Bateman is mistaken for at least half a dozen people and at one point Evelyn remarks that: "'Everybody's rich'..." "Everybody's good-looking"..." "Everybody has a great body now"' (Ellis: 23) The young characters of this novel appear to be a race of well dressed clones.

to be the best of the best. There is no room for failure in this race for appearances, and if Bateman sees anyone wearing non-designer clothes, eating something that is not extravagantly arranged and/or prepared in a mysterious/trendy way or looking/acting in any other way as if it does not concern him, he is automatically considered an unimportant outsider, a nobody.

The 'lusting' for/obsession with commodities so central to Haug is vital to an analysis of *American Psycho*:

"You should have the Diet Pepsi instead of the Diet Coke," I say. "It's much better with rum and has a lower sodium content." The waiter, Scott, Anne, and even Courtney – they all stare at me as if I've offered some kind of diabolical, apocalyptic observation, as if I were shattering a myth highly held, or destroying an oath solemnly regarded..."Listen," I say, my voice trembling with emotion, "have whatever you want, but I'm telling you I recommend the Diet Pepsi." I look down at my lap, at the blue cloth napkin's edge, and for a moment think I'm going to cry; my chin trembles and I can't swallow. Courtney reaches over and touches my wrist gently, stroking my Rolex. "It's okay Patrick. It really is..." A sharp pain near my liver overcomes the surge of emotion and I sit up in my chair, startled, confused... (Ellis: 97-98)

Bateman, perhaps in a 'fit of clarity', explains to a female friend in a restaurant that the use-value of one brand name (Diet Pepsi) is better than another (Diet Coke). This may, or may not be the case, nevertheless it is commodity aesthetics that has created an image of Coke more sensually appealing to the consumer than Pepsi. There exists what appears to be a hierarchy of brand names. It is as if the Diet Coke has more power (i.e. 'truth') to these people than the Diet Pepsi. Indeed, this is the reason the others react in such a drastic way. They cannot apprehend the simple concept of 'use-value', only the 'promise of use-value' manipulated by commodity aesthetics is important to these people. However, to them it is not a negative thing, the illusory image, it is just 'reality'. In this 'reality' Coke has become an icon of success; Pepsi has this to a lesser degree. Patrick is embedded in this 'reality' to such an extent that when he realises what he has done, he is instantly thrown into despair and misery, even to the degree that he suffers a physical pain. Suddenly, it is as if he awakens from a dream and he is startled. It is as if a schizophrenic alter ego has taken over in the previous conversation and conferred a truth, ill accepted. Two other things in this scene point out the characters' fascination with commodities. First of all, when Bateman begins to feel queasy he still manages to notice the nice napkin. Second of all, instead of stroking Bateman's hand when he is feeling depressed, Courtney strokes his Rolex, the commodified symbol of riches and power in, if nowhere else, the business world.

Sexual experiences are also commodified, which is highly evident in the situation where Patrick has hired two escort girls, has had intercourse with them and then subdued them by nailing them to the floor:

³¹ I.e. Yuppies.

As usual, in an attempt to understand these girls I'm filming their deaths. With Torri and Tiffany I use a Minox LX ultra-miniature camera that takes 9.5mm film, has a 15mm f/3.5 lens, an exposure meter and a built-in neutral density filter and sits on a tripod...[after the mutilation of the two girls] I'm sitting in a chair, naked, covered with blood, watching HBO on Owen's TV, drinking Corona, complaining out loud, wondering why Owen doesn't have Cinemax. (304)

Even in this cruel scene of inhuman atrocities, Patrick Bateman is unable to keep his attention away from the object of his fascination, not the death of the girls, but the high-tech camera which is described in detail as commodity aesthetics would sound in a commercial. And afterwards, he does not pay any special attention to what he has done, admittedly, what foul deed he has committed. Rather, he sits relaxed but outraged, with his deluxe foreign beer in his hand, at the fact that his colleague has not invested in a 'better' channel on his TV. In another scene Bateman cannot even complete sexual intercourse without having a specific commodity, water-soluble spermicidal lubricant, on his latex condom. (102) Later, when Bateman refuses to wear a condom Courtney states "If you don't use one [a condom] you're not going to feel anything anyway." (105) All this clearly demonstrates that the world of the characters in *American Psycho* is a realm where commodification and commodity aesthetics is not altogether inapplicable to sexuality and sexual intercourse. However, their obsession with commodity aesthetics seem to create an alienation from the rest of society, their world is very small and very exclusive.

Decadent Facets

Throughout the novel, we get a distinct feeling of decadency as if there is something 'festering' in the mind of Patrick Bateman and his whole circle of the 'yuppie-kingdom' of Wall Street. As James Annesley stated earlier³², this age of late capitalism is unique in its expression of the decadent, because it is an era in which there is no barrier between pleasures and commodification, which has been clearly shown in the previous chapter. Moreover, this contemporary perception of the decadent also includes a shared sense of register³³, we all sense the decadent, but we refrain from saying it. This is also signalled in the quote on page 14, where it is suggested that Bateman demolished some collective truth by stating that Diet Pepsi was better than Diet Coke. This unified adherence to the laws that commodity aesthetics proclaim is a symbol of this unconsciously shared decadence.

The characters in the novel are all symptoms of decadence. This is embodied in a speech held by Bateman at the beginning of the book:

³² Cf. Chapter 2.2.

³³ Cf. Chapter 2.2.

...We have to end apartheid for one. And slow down the nuclear arms race, stop terrorism and world hunger. Ensure a strong national defense, prevent the spread of communism in Central America...prevent U.S. military involvement over-seas. We have to ensure that America is a respected world power... clean up environmental damage...At the same time we need to promote economic growth and business expansion...We have to encourage a return to traditional moral values and curb graphic sex and violence on TV...Most importantly we have to promote general social concern and less materialism in young people (Ellis: 15-16)

To Nietzsche, decadence is a feeling we all register, but do not speak out loud, indeed, after Bateman is finished with his speech none in the 'audience' interrupts him or corrects him for his erroneous and fragmented conclusions. The reason for this might well be that they have all been pacified by the decadence of their commodified lifestyle and numbed into a state of 'un-reality'. They no longer have any connection to 'reality', Bateman definitely does not have any notion of what he is saying, because most of things he says are contradictory and against what he as a yuppie signifies. They are all unable to recognise 'the real world', the world outside their own sphere, they are dissociated from any world that is not provided by the tranquillising, 'numbing' effect of media hype, we begin to get a sense of Baudrillard's 'Hyper-realism'. Inasmuch as everything has become part of the economic realm in contemporary society, it is impossible for Bateman or his peers to distinguish between ideological truths and the contradictions in his speech, his speech: based on blended images and attitudes from the media. Their 'reality' becomes one shredded, decadent blur of thoughts and perspectives.

Media as a commodity is not the only important factor of decadence in *American Psycho*, drugs as a commodity also play an important part; this is only in the form of cocaine, however. Cocaine is yet another way for the young urban professionals to achieve acclaim from their peers. It is, as with other expensive commodities, a symbol of power and strength for the yuppie:

[Cocaine] seems to provide the perfect narcotic for a figure like Patrick Bateman. It is a drug that both underlines his success and increases his sense of power. Where figures in other blank novels take drugs in order to satisfy a decadent desire for liberation, Bateman takes drugs as a way of sharpening his murderous grip on the world. (Annesley: 132)

Whenever Bateman buys cocaine in *American Psycho*, we get a feeling that he is tied even more to the underlying sense of decay and decadence in the text, even though he achieves power and success. This power and success is also a beacon of decadence, because, as Nietzsche stated: 'it [decadence] is able to make weakness look like force'³⁴, hence, Bateman is not finding strength, but weakness.³⁵

³⁴ Cf. Chapter 2.2

³⁵ Albeit this, he is still seen as powerful to his peers who, like Bateman, are not conscious of anything outside their 'sphere of reality'.

The Violent Side to American Psycho

Of course, one of the topics in the novel leaping to mind is the violence, the explicit mutilation and murder of countless beings, the most important thing to all but a few of the critics at the time of its publication. Agreed, it is important in *American Psycho* to note 'how' and 'when', but more importantly 'why', Patrick Bateman practises violence.

Initially it would seem that Crowther³⁶ is right with regards to Bateman, it does seem that he is occupied with control and domination in situations where he is being violent, for example when he invites a girl home and in the middle of intercourse:³⁷

...I slap her, then lightly punch her in the mouth, then kiss it, biting her lips. Fear, dread, confusion overwhelm her...she tries to push me off. I roll away and pretend to let her escape and then, while she's gathering her clothes, muttering about what a "crazy fucking bastard" I am, I leap out at her, jackal-like, literally foaming at the mouth. She cries, apologizing, sobbing hysterically, begging for me not to hurt her, in tears...But even her sobs fail to arouse me...I can imagine my virtual absence of humanity fills her with mind-bending horror. (Ellis: 327)

Unlike most people, Bateman does not have any moral restraints, which in turn allows him to see nothing wrong with violence, or at least, him using violence. As we can see from the prior quote, he sees himself as some kind of predator, who toys with his victim before bounding towards it, seizing it. Bateman also implies that he has rabies, i.e. an infection or illness. Furthermore, he expects her crying to stimulate him and his stature to impose a sense of fear-stricken awe in her and he even admits to appear inhuman. All in all, his behaviour signifies a, morally wrong, obsession with violence and power.

Even though *American Psycho* is fiction it can still be considered a world, and inside that world, the difference between the representation of violence, which Bateman tapes and sees on TV, and the violence he commits, is no longer there. To him, his actions transform themselves into nothing more than the 'un-real' TV violence, the real and the un-real merge.

Sub-Conclusion: American Psycho

Patrick Bateman, yuppie *extraordinaire*, is concerned with how he looks, how he dresses, what he smells like, what he owns and what he is getting, in short he is obsessed with commodities and their aesthetics, and the same goes for all but a few of his acquaintances. This fixation drives him to scenes of uncanny display of feelings and lack thereof. In one incident he nearly cries when he

³⁶ Cf. Chapter 2.3

³⁷ The following quote does not depict the most graphical violent incident in the book, there are those with more vividly described depravities, but this quote sufficiently exemplifies the violent nature of the protagonist.

strays from the narrow path of commodity aesthetics' sensual axioms, and in another incident he describes himself as a predator, a 'monster'. He symbolises the worst case scenario of the decadence inherent in our late capitalist society and is a product of its dehumanising effect. There is no escape from this world for Patrick Bateman, as the last few words in the book, describing a sign above some drapes, suggests: '...THIS IS NOT AN EXIT.' (399). This will go on, Bateman and yuppies like him will continue to thrive, there is still room for the yuppies (or their heirs), the ones who 'fetishise' commodities. It is an alienated world, a world reserved only for these people whom are captivated by the illusions of commodity aesthetics, the ones who stress the important difference between designer clothes and 'other rags'. One of the main reason behind it all is that this is a world in which decadence is so well rooted in late capitalist society that they cannot see the wood for the trees, a world of 'un-reality', a world in which violence can be inflicted on those outside the 'Yuppie Kingdom' without even flinching. Throughout the story there is the intrusive feeling of an implied author. An implied author giving a critique of Bateman's ethics, through his vile acts of atrocity, and aesthetics, through his obsessive frame of mind regarding commodity and commodity aesthetics. It is clear that Ellis, as the implied author, could be considered a puritan to this end, because of the renunciation of the commodified world and the implicit notion in the novel that sex leads to pain, both puritan impressions.

Fight Club

In 1996 Chuck Palahniuk debuted as a novelist with *Fight Club*³⁸. The story is about the 30-year-old narrator³⁹ who finds out that he is living a zombie like existence of nonsensical drudgery and in an attempt to flee this super-conventional existence he participates in several support groups for people with terminal illnesses. He connects to these people because they show one of the last undeniable truths about reality, the inevitable death of everything. However, this is not enough, by 'luck' he meets Tyler Durden who has the perfect idea for him, Fight Club, a place to go where guys beat each other up to feel the rush that only the pleasure of violence can bring. Seeing that even this is not enough, Tyler Durden constructs the idea of Project Mayhem, the idea: To totally destroy contemporary society⁴⁰ through arson, mischief, assault, misinformation, organised chaos, anarchy etc. and upon the ashes of the old, create a new world in which everyone is free.

In this chapter, I will show how *Fight Club* breaks away from an occupation with commodities and commodification shown in *American Psycho*. Moreover, I will delineate the ways in which *Fight Club* can be thought of as being a symptom of decadence and indicate how important violence is in the novel's context.

³⁸ Since then he has written *Survivor* (1999) and *Invisible Monsters* (1999) and is currently working on *Choke* (April 2001).

³⁹ Who is suffering from multiple personality disorder.

⁴⁰ Which, to the protagonists, is nothing but a shell with people as manipulated consumer drones.

Rejecting the Commodified World

The protagonists both have interesting insight into their own society and the philosophy expressed from start to finish in the novel is very much a critique of capitalism and its ways:

This is the world's tallest building, and this high up the wind is always cold. It's so quiet this high up, the feeling you get is that you're one of those space monkeys. You do the little job you're trained to do. Pull a lever. Push a button. You don't understand any of it, and then you just die. (Palahniuk: 12)

"I am trash and shit and crazy to you and this whole fucking world," Tyler said to the union president. "You don't care where I live or how I feel, or what I eat or how I feed my kids or how I pay the doctor if I get sick...(115)

I am nothing in the world compared to Tyler. I am helpless. I am stupid, and all I do is want and need things. My tiny life. My little shit job. My Swedish furniture. I never, no, never told anyone this, but before I met Tyler, I was planning to buy a dog and name it "Entourage." This is how bad your life can get. Kill me. (146)

There is a deep sense of not belonging or feeling estranged/alienated in this race for commodities, a hopelessness in living in a world with no purpose and meaning. Humans are almost like machines trained to do something and nothing besides that. There is also the worrying of a worker who knows that his employer does not care about him outside the sphere of work, to the employer, the worker is merely a tool with which to help the construct of commodities. Indeed, some people are highly 'addicted' to their commodities, as when Tyler is working at a dinner party, the madam of the house, while holding a scrap of paper, asks the waiters if they have seen anyone go into the private quarters of the house. It seems someone has written a note for her saying that s/he has peed in one of her infinite number of perfume bottles. Tyler has written this, although it is not true, he has not done so, but the lady of the house thinks so, and is devastated, which goes to show how much a commodity can control the way a person thinks. She acts as if these commodities help her express her person or her sexuality.

In addition to this there is the rejection of commodities further expressed in *Fight Club*. Apart from the previous incident, which to an extent reminds us of the episode with Bateman and the two kinds of soft drink, there is the realisation in the book that the goal is to refrain from any interest in the aesthetic look of a commodity. This is exemplified when one of the protagonists compare reading IKEA furniture catalogue nowadays to the time when he was young and read Playboy. He acknowledges the connection between the two because they are both grounded in sensual/sexual perception. Indeed, it is not until *Fight Club* starts that these people realise how worthless all of this preoccupation with commodities is:

"You have a class of young strong men and women, and they want to give their lives to something. Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they

don't need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need. We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives. We have a spiritual depression. We have to show these men and women freedom by enslaving them, and show them courage by frightening them. (149)

..."As long as you're at Fight Club, you're not how much money you've got in the bank You're not your job"... (143)

The men and women of Fight Club are alienated because of their unwillingness to participate in the race of commodity aesthetics, but at the same time they must have a feeling of unity, the words 'class' and 'generation' is used in the previous quote signifying, at the least, unity to some extent. According to the dogma of Tyler Durden, there is nothing in our generation except what is created for us in the image of commodity aesthetics and we are learning that what we want is not what adverts program us to want, rather, we want freedom from a manipulated existence from the womb to the grave. It should be noted here that Haug would consider it quite an extraordinary feat for people within the borders of capitalism to shake of the numbing effect of commodity aesthetics and realise that there is something outside of this 'shell'. Nevertheless, what the characters in *Fight Club* find is not without complications, there is something paradoxical about the methods they are using.⁴¹

Centrality of Decadence

Fight Club is very much a manifestation of what James Annesley calls a society in which there are 'only consumer based pleasures...' (Annesley: 117), and starting Fight Club could definitely be seen as an attempt to find a 'pleasure' that is not commodified.

"I am the all-singing, all-dancing crap of this world," the space monkey tells the mirror. "I am the toxic waste by-product of God's creation' (169)

I wanted to destroy everything beautiful I'd never have. Burn the Amazon rain forests. Pump chlorofluorocarbons straight up to gobble the ozone. Open the dump valves on supertankers and uncap offshore oil wells. I wanted to kill all the fish I couldn't afford to eat, and smother the French beaches I'd never see. I wanted the whole world to hit bottom. (123)

Like Fight Club does with clerks and box boys, Project Mayhem will break up civilization so we can make something better out of this world... This was the goal of Project Mayhem, Tyler said, the complete and right-away destruction of civilization. (125)

⁴¹ Which will be discussed in the following chapter.

The decadent feeling throughout the story is stressed in these three excerpts. It is based on a deeply felt unwillingness to participate in a society where you are run as if you are a robot, meant to perform a couple of tasks, and that is it. The world, which is only preoccupied with selling you different commodities, whether it is French beaches, expensive fish, a condominium or an endangered panda etc., is slowly choking these people in *Fight Club*. They have come to realise that no matter what the media tells them, they are *not* going to become big movie or rock stars. What ought to be heeded is, as stated earlier in chapter 6.2⁴², our contemporary late capitalist society can be seen as decadent, so the decadence these ‘space monkeys’ refer to may be an even more profound decadence than the decadent society they are trying to break free of. So in a way, they actually utilise that which they want to escape. This paradox may be the only way of escaping the oppression under which they suffer. The only way to escape this rigid world of commodification is to destroy⁴³ that which is old, so people can begin anew. However, this destruction of civilisation, merely a commodified reality, is like the crucifixion of Christ, it is only through disaster that a world can be resurrected. To the members of Project Mayhem, the space monkeys, decadence leads to salvation. However, the anti-establishment ideal of Tyler does not end here: “‘If you’re male and you’re Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do you believe about God?’” (141). There is a deep resentment toward any patriarchal authority. We can relate this to Jean-Francois Lyotard’s notion of the death of the grand narrative⁴⁴; however, this would take us into a far-reaching discussion of postmodernism, which, due to lack of space, cannot be composed here.

As stated in chapter X.X⁴⁵, the decadence of the late 20th century is so embedded in our society that we are all but blind to its effects. Yet, the Tyler in *Fight Club* seems to have understood what is lacking in our society, namely non-commodified ‘pleasures’ as when the two main characters meet, and Tyler is constructing something out of driftwood that he had carried up a beach, dug a hole underneath one pole and sat in the shadow underneath:

What Tyler had created was the shadow of a giant hand. Only now the fingers were Nosferatu-long and the thumb was too short, but he said at how exactly at four-thirty the hand was perfect. The giant shadow hand was perfect for one minute, and for one perfect minute Tyler had sat in the palm of perfection he’d created himself. (33)

Even though Tyler has created something perfect, as if God himself, it will wither away, and that is also central to his philosophy, ‘everything is falling apart’ is repeated on several occasions in the novel. Furthermore, there are two interesting things about *Fight Club* in the context of decadence. First of all, there is no use for any kind of narcotic.⁴⁶ Being a deeply decadent text about urban life

⁴² Cf. Chapter 3.2.

⁴³ The word ‘destroy’ often connotes something decadent.

⁴⁴ The death of great authorities such as Christianity, Marxism, Psychoanalysis etc., something at the heart of Postmodernism.

⁴⁵ Cf. Chapter 2.2.

⁴⁶ Apart from one scene of minor significance where the protagonist’s girl friend tries to take some sleeping pills.

in late capitalist metropolis one would assume that this would surface as a theme sooner or later. However, narcotics are irrelevant in this context alongside every other commodity considering that the most important thing is to reject the commodified reality, hence including narcotics. Second of all, Tyler Durden keep referring to his colleagues in Project Mayhem as ‘space monkeys’ revealing them to still be slaves, like the first monkeys shot into space almost like test subjects.

However, even though they are still slaves, they are no longer slaves in capitalist society anymore, they are now slaves in the decadent anarchy of Tyler Durden, which goal is to destroy the contemporary society, a different kind of decadence, to free these people. This calls to mind what Nietzsche thought about the necessity of decadence. It is as if the decadence of Tyler Durden’s anarchic movement is righteous in its own way, as a way to dispose of an illness that has ‘plagued’ our contemporary western world for some time now. Nietzsche might have said that without this revolution of Tyler Durden we would not be able to appreciate what lies after annihilation, the renewal. Lastly, it could be argued that Tyler Durden’s vision is just the opposite of what it appears to be, because if one is to trust Nietzsche, decadence always disguises itself as it opposite.

Violence – a pre-requisite

In *Fight Club* ‘violence’ is tool, or at least ‘fighting’ is a tool. But, it is also more than a tool, it is an un-commodified pleasure to the members of Fight Club. Paul Crowther might be right to a certain degree when he talks about the pleasure of violence combining male fantasies of power, virility and control, see chapter 2.3⁴⁷, but he is not right, in the context of *Fight Club* anyway, to say that this is negative toward women:

After a night in fight club, everything in the real world gets the volume turned down. Nothing can piss you off. Your word is law, and if other people break the law or question you, even that doesn’t piss you off...Maybe self-improvement isn’t the answer...Maybe self-destruction is the answer. (49)

You aren’t alive anywhere like you’re alive at fight club...Fight club isn’t about winning or losing fights. Fight club isn’t about words. (51)

Fight club is not football on television...live by satellite...commercials pitching beer every ten minutes...After you’ve been to fight club, watching football on television is watching pornography when you could be having great sex. (50)

Me, with my punched-out eyes and dried blood in big black crusty stains on my pants, I’m saying HELLO to everybody at work. HELLO! Look at me. HELLO! I

⁴⁷ Cf. Chapter 2.3

am so ZEN. This is BLOOD. This is NOTHING. Hello. Everything is nothing, and it's so cool to be ENLIGHTENED. Like me. Sigh. (64)

Unlike Crowther's theory of moral restraint in people in the application of violence, in *Fight Club* people just stand around in a circle, sometimes not even making a sound, and watching the two people who are fighting. The fight is not about winning or losing, it is about fighting something else than your opponent and experiencing something, a 'pleasure', that is beyond the grasp of the commodified world. A commodified, and inferior, copy of *Fight Club* is exemplified in football on television with its commercials and artificiality. Indeed, this comparison to the artificiality of television reminds us of the difference between what is real violence, *Fight Club*, and what is a representation of violence, television.⁴⁸ There is also something un-real, or more exactly 'non-conventional' about the violence in *Fight Club*. The power these men gain from fighting in *Fight Club* is incomparable. There is calmness after a fight, after a personal display of violence, and it is almost religious, the referring to being 'Zen' is a clear sign, being pure and calm. It is as though they are cleansing themselves, experiencing catharsis, through fighting, and they are overwhelmed by a clean, pure sensation after their first fight, they are replenished. Each time they fight they are removed one step from the decadent world and one step closer to the 'enlightenment' of Tyler Durden, to a kind of puritan disposition.

The basic need in these men is not to exercise power and control over each other but to exercise control over a world that would control them. Through self-destruction one can detach oneself from a world that would have you self-improve instead. It is perhaps adequate, as Montesquieu believed⁴⁹, to think of attaining tranquillity as the purpose of terror, and hence, violence. It is definitely clear that Tyler Durden could be thought of as a despot, but with the good of his 'people' at heart. And since, again according to Montesquieu, terror is a grounding aspect of Despotism, Tyler Durden can without a doubt be seen as a leader of such, a despot. However, as with Nietzsche's notion of decadence, terror should not, in this context, be thought of as something negative despite the fact that civilisation as we know it is going to be destroyed if it is left up to Durden. Unless the women are thought of as a deciding part of a dominating patriarchal commodity culture, the violence expressed in *Fight Club* cannot be thought of as being negative toward women, as Crowther might have wanted it to appear. In Durden's words, violence is a criterion in their destruction of this world, and in their creation of a new and purified world.

The last important thing in this context is that the paradox of decadence expressed in the previous chapter applies to this chapter as well, because it is only through violence and terror, packaged in a somewhat anarchic rule, that Tyler and his minions can obtain freedom from an even more oppressing society of commodities and 'emptiness'.

⁴⁸ Even though, it could be said that a football match on television is just a transmission of real violence from somewhere else. However, it is still a representation and therefore not the same as 'the real'.

⁴⁹ Cf. Chapter 2.3.

Sub-Conclusion: Fight Club

As the men of Fight Club find out, there can be something more to life than the bleak reality of commodification and empty dreams created by commodity aesthetics. There is an escape, a pleasure as of yet un-commodified. The point is no longer to care about how you look, what car you own, what kind of furniture you have, the question now is: Do you wish to keep on living in this conventional and dreary life? The decadent philosophy of Tyler Durden and Fight Club/Project Mayhem is, in some ways, more decadent than the society they wish to leave behind. However, this decadence only goes so far, at least in theory. If Tyler Durden would succeed in his master plan to disrupt society as we know it and create a new one, there is no way we would know that his 'reign of terror' would stop. The first part of his plan is excellent, a positive future perspective for the world, but there is nothing that tells us the power of being in control would not twist his mind as it has done with leaders throughout Earth's history. To this end, his vision may not be flawless. However, if we see Tyler as an implied author as well as main character, we get a feeling that what he is proposing is a puritan cleansing, the renunciation of the world of commodities and a fresh 'natural' start free from moral and aesthetic decadence. Tyler's vision seems to be one of the best answers to the analgesic effect of the commodified reality of late capitalism and commodity aesthetic, even though, according to Nietzsche, it might be a veil obscuring the truth, and ipso facto, in truth, be the exact opposite. However, we also know that Tyler's vision can be seen as being puritan, the purging of the old sinful society to make way for a new and aesthetically and ethically 'correct' society.

Conclusion & 'Solution'

There is nothing 'worthy' outside the sphere of commodity aesthetics and commodification for the yuppie characters in *American Psycho*. They are all concerned with images and illusions, how commodity aesthetics tell them they should own, look, smell and even feel.⁵⁰ Patrick Bateman is typical of this yuppie frenzy, he is a bleak worst case scenario of his world. Through intensive commodification Patrick senses of the real has been converted into what commodity aesthetics would want it to be, i.e. fully preoccupied with the sensual promise of use-values.

For Patrick this consumerism leads to an amputation of pathos, which in turn makes him a very unstable individual, which is exemplified in the scene where he is mortified when he realises that he has broken an unwritten rule of commodity aesthetics, the hierarchy of brand names. However, it not only does this, but it also makes him commit horrible acts of inhuman atrocities of

⁵⁰ The latter is, of course, to an extent 'un-real' because if they are to follow, as they do, the mixed images and signals they receive from advertisements it definitely forms an emotional unbalanced individual.

predatory mutilation and murder. Due to the 'un-reality' in him, there is no difference in the violence he sees in the media, the representation of violence, and the violence he commits, and he has distanced himself from the latter. Patrick Bateman is a symbol of decadence in our capitalist society and is an example of its dehumanising consequences.

Even though *American Psycho* is portrayed as a bleak look into our world as it is, you still get the feeling of an implied author reaching out with criticism in his mind, a critique of Bateman's aesthetics and ethics. Ellis clearly disapproves of Bateman's world view, disapproves to such an extent, that he could be considered a puritan, both because of his rejection of our preoccupation with commodification and because of the impression we get throughout the book, that sex leads to pain.

As the men of Fight Club find out, there can be something more to life than the bleak reality of commodification and commodity aesthetics. The alternative is a search for something outside the sphere of commodities, something as of yet un-commodified, and Tyler Durden reveals this to be violence, i.e. fighting. The decadent feeling we get from *Fight Club* is, to an extent, more intensified than *American Psycho*. The main characters in *Fight Club* wish to escape commodified reality, but can only do so by utilise an even more decadent perspective. The idea is to let go, just reject everything you have been 'taught' by commodity aesthetics about the necessities of the sensual illusions of commodities. In *Fight Club*, we also get a clear feeling of a puritan conviction: the only way to cleanse yourself is to renounce the world of commodities and begin anew in a world free from moral and aesthetics decadence. Tyler's vision seems to be one of the best answers to the analgesic effect of the commodified reality of late capitalism and commodity aesthetic, even though, according to Nietzsche, it might be a veil obscuring the truth, and ipso facto, in truth, be the exact opposite. However, we also know that Tyler's vision can be seen as being puritan, as is Ellis', the purging of the old sinful society to make way for a new and aesthetically and ethically 'correct' society.

When we take look at how everything in society has been commodified, even down to feelings⁵¹, there is no doubt in my mind that the outlook of our society is bleak at best. A problem they do not touch upon in either *American Psycho* or *Fight Club* is whether it really makes any difference that we are aware that we are manipulated consumers. Does it matter that the puppet knows its strings are being pulled? What can it do about it? And in the end is it not better to be ignorant? There is one thing that can be done about these dilemmas, one could fully reject commodified reality, but Tyler Durden's reality might be a little too excessive even for those who want to break away from a guided reality. However, there is a way for us to fight the dilemmas posed. When one has learned about the disheartening truths of our contemporary western society, one is ready to search for an answer, hence ignorance is not to be preferred and the puppet is no longer just a puppet, it is a conscious puppet, and, compared to the numbed and pacified model consumer, consciousness makes all the difference.

⁵¹ E.g. the Danish show 'The Robinson Expedition'.

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