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“THIS IS NOT AN EXIT”: NEOLIBERALISM AND THE NINETIES

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Abstract

Francis Fukuyama's 1989 essay "The End of History" argues that at the turn of the millennium, the Western neoliberal ideals of economic liberty, free market capitalism, and individual reason have triumphed over all other economic, political, and social systems. In recent years, the term neoliberalism along with the economic policies of late 1970s and 1980s have received significant critical attention. This project will directly engage with, and push back on, Fukuyama's thesis that neoliberal policies of freedom, individualism, and egalitarianism ushered in some form of late capitalist utopia in the waning years of the twentieth century. Using Fredric Jameson's theories of the intensification of capital into all areas of cultural production, I intend to show how three novels during the 1990s—specifically *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, and *Blonde*— each function as an experimental, postmodern attempt to address, resist, and engage with the intensification of neoliberalism at the end of the century. My goal here is not to transcribe Jameson's methods onto these three texts, but rather employ his style of analysis—the need for a new cognitive map or a new style of consciousness—to show how the speed, complexity, diversity, and saturation of late capitalism's cultural production is disorienting to the individual agent. These three novels each explore themes of alienation, isolation, and exploitation and how the neoliberal, utopian ideals of infinite progress and universal truth are dangerous to the individual and destructive to social cohesion.

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Introduction: Mapping Neoliberalism onto the Nineties

In Francis Fukuyama's highly contested and controversial 1989 essay "The End of History" he argues that with the turn of the millennium on the horizon, the Western ideals of economic liberty, free markets, and individual reason have triumphed over all other economic, political, and social systems. The essay was instantly polarizing, garnering support from those aligned with his assessment of current events, but also faced intense scrutiny from those wary of his discourse. For example, in *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida specifically criticizes Fukuyama's argument: "at a time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelize in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realized itself as the ideal of human history: never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of earth" (106).

Written in the waning years of the twentieth century, and on the heels of a decade (the 1980s) steeped in material consumption, hostile financial takeovers, and tremendous capital accumulation, Fukuyama boldly declares the "unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism," signals the unequivocal "triumph of the West, of the Western idea," as well as the "total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism" (1). Though a bold assertion at the time—the triumph of a singular idea and system—it is easy to see how he arrived at the conclusion. The United States was on the brink of winning a long, expensive, and potentially destructive Cold War and the neoliberal economic policies of Ronald Regan coupled with the abandoning of the gold standard ushered in a decade of seemingly limitless, though highly speculative, economic growth.

However, in his essay Fukuyama not only believes that the Western economic and political idea emerged victorious, but it did so with such totalizing authority as to render all other possible

alternatives obsolete. He writes, "What we may be witnessing is…the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (1). Fukuyama therefore sees the Western idea, specifically the global hegemony of the United States, as the final resolution of an economic Hegelian dialectic, an ultimate achievement representing the absolute, terminal progression of mankind's historical process. Never mind the inherent danger of any totalizing discourse, Fukuyama seemingly undermines his own argument by noting how more than one philosopher has erroneously declared the end of history before,[1] a contradiction he overlooks while making his case for the "universal homogenous state" a state where "all prior contradictions are resolved and all human needs are satisfied" (3).

Fukuyama builds his case for the "universal homogenous state" by analyzing how modern liberalism (what I will call neoliberalism moving forward) overcame two distinct challenges to its supremacy: namely fascism and communism. According to Fukuyama, fascism as ideology was destroyed with the defeat of the Nazis in World War II and the nuclear attack on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On the other hand, communism lost its appeal when large swaths of the world's population recognized how "the egalitarianism of modern America represents the essential achievement of the classless society envisioned by Marx" (8). Fukuyama does acknowledge both rich and poor exist under the policies of American neoliberalism, but "the root causes of economic inequality do not have to do with the underlying legal and social structure of society, which remains fundamentally egalitarian and moderately redistributionist" (8). But, In *A Brief*

[1] Fukuyama notes Hegel proclaimed that history ended in 1806 after the defeat of Napoleon and with the recognition of the principles of the French Revolution. Likewise, French philosopher Alexandre Kojeve argued that history ended with the emergence of the "universal homogenous state" (Fukuyama 3) after World War II, which he felt was epitomized by the "American way of life" (Fukuyama 3).

History of Neoliberalism David Harvey directly challenges this notion of egalitarianism, concluding "that neoliberalization was from the very beginning a project to achieve the restoration of class power" (16). Even though communism was certainly on the way out in the late 1980s, Harvey shows how modern economic policies and unregulated markets appeal to emotional keywords like freedom and individuality, but in practice result in the opposite of what Fukuyama sees as the fundamental egalitarianism of American neoliberalism. Rather than a utopian egalitarianism, the actual result is an extreme concentration of wealth among elites, combined with the erosion of social solidarity through the undermining of labor unions and demonization of collective bargaining. For Harvey, freedom and individual autonomy benefits only an elite class while leaving the masses unprotected and adrift in an unregulated system.

After presenting a somewhat myopic view of American inequality, an economic gap which he himself acknowledges has "grown in recent years"[2] (8), Fukuyama then shifts his focus to imagining the potential outcomes of a global neoliberal superstructure—what he calls "Common Marketization" (16)—and how that might shape global politics and economics. This projection of American neoliberalism onto a global stage is startling for two reasons. First, Fukuyama has already exposed the incongruence of equality as theory and equality in practice, and second, he ignores the ethnocentrism inherent in the claim that his ideas will succeed across all cultures and, as a result, will ignite an age of global peace.

Post history, Fukuyama assumes there will be no more global conflict as a singular, universal economic metanarrative will prove infallible. Regardless of any current holdouts to Western

[2] At the time of this writing Jeff Bezos's, the CEO of Amazon, has a net worth of $204 billion and he is projected to become the first trillionaire in history. It is also worth noting that Bezos's net worth has increased by $50 billion during the coronavirus pandemic while at the same time 40 million Americans have filed for unemployment (Hiatt 1).

liberal thinking (at the time China and Russia, now two global superpowers) he contends all major world players will eventually adopt neoliberal economic values and practices, primarily those allowing individuals the opportunity to acquire material wealth and to have unrestricted access to consumer goods. With political conflict solved, all that remains is "the ability to build up material wealth at an accelerated rate on the basis of front-ranking science and high-level techniques and technology, and to distribute it fairly, and through joint efforts to restore and protect the resources necessary for mankind's survival acquires decisive importance" (16). And finally Fukuyama again underscores the ultimate supremacy of neoliberal economic theory explaining "International life for the part of the world that has reached the end of history is far more preoccupied with economics than with politics or strategy" (15). Once the entire globe submits to globalized, transnational economic discourse what could possibly go wrong?

With that in mind, my intent with this project will not be to scrutinize other alternative theories as to the defeat of fascism in 1945, or the fall of communism in the late 1980s, or the economic booms of the 1980s and 1990s. Instead my goal is to engage with, and push back on, Fukuyama's thesis that neoliberal policies of freedom, individualism, and egalitarianism ushered in some form of late capitalist utopia. In fact as early as 1991, only two years after Fukuyama's declaration that history has ended, authors like Bret Easton Ellis in his novel *American Psycho* begin to directly challenge his assertions. And this reaction to economic saturation and its impact on culture continues in novels like Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and Joyce Carol Oates's *Blonde*. Rather than a late capitalist utopia of individual autonomy created though wholesale market freedom, novels like *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, and *Blonde* offer an alternative paradigm of alienation, isolation, dissatisfaction, narcissism, and a fragmented, often schizophrenic detachment from a world consumed by commerce instead of community.

To better understand the effects of the neoliberal policies of the 1980s on the literature of the 1990s it is critical to understand what exactly neoliberalism means. David Harvey locates the start of the Western neoliberal turn in 1979-80 with the election of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Regan and remarks that “Future historians may well look up the years 1978-80 as a revolutionary turning-point in the world’s social and economic history” (33). Though it would take several decades to realize the long term effect of these early 1980s policy changes, it is clear that two of the world’s most important economies were undergoing radical change with regards to finance, labor, and industry regulations. Originally cloaked under the term “globalization,” this new theory of economics eventually was given the less threatening name of neoliberalism. David Harvey defines neoliberalism as “the first instance of a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). This seems like a benign enough definition, but Harvey concurs with Fukuyama when he contends that neoliberalism is now the “hegemonic mode of discourse” that has “pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has been incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (3). What is important for the purposes of this project though is the total saturation of culture by and through an economic theory.[3] However, for Harvey a nefarious plan to restore class power rests on the pillars of the neoliberal state; a sort of economic Trojan horse of class warfare. To the unassuming masses, neoliberalism appeals to the powerful feelings

[3] For a thorough discussion of the penetration of market values to and through all institutions, culture, and individual subjectivity see Wendy Brown’s “Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy.” She argues neoliberalism “involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social actions” (1).

evoked by words like freedom and individuality, and unites the public under the guise of a utopian libertarian project aimed at providing equal access to opportunity, capital, and consumer goods. But lurking under the surface is “a *political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (19). However, this emphasis on individualism, coupled with the desire to accumulate (both wealth and goods) leads to a contradiction “between a seductive but alienating possessive individualism on the one hand and the desire for a meaningful collective on the other” (69). The main protagonists in *American Psycho, Fight Club, and Blonde* all at some point struggle with this exact contradiction, the tension between alienating individualism and meaningful community. Each one is an individual monad adrift in a postmodern dystopia trying to resist the alienation and isolation of modern life, with mostly disastrous outcomes.

In some cases this individual chaos of identity and of the market even “generates a situation that becomes increasingly ungovernable. It may even lead to a breakdown of all bonds of solidarity and a condition verging on social anarchy and nihilism” (82). In *Fight* Club and *American Psycho* unreliable narrators struggle to reconcile the relentless quest for individual fulfillment with their need for community and belonging, while *Blonde* uses shifting perspectives, tenses, and voices to show the impact of participation in the American experiment on subject formation and fragmentation. All three novels incorporate a postmodern style to study this synthesis of an economic modality and cultural production. Fortunately, literary theorist Fredric Jameson has written extensively on all of these topics, including postmodernism, capitalism, and cultural output as I will draw upon his research to support my claims.

In “Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Jameson calls for “a new mutation in what can perhaps no longer be called consciousness” (75). In other words, the speed,

complexity, diversity, saturation, and intensity of late capitalism's cultural production requires a new iteration of consciousness or subjectivity, something that transcends the individual modernist subject as well as the utopian ideals of infinite progress and universal truth. My goal here is not to transcribe Jameson's methods onto these three texts, but rather employ his style of analysis—the need for a new cognitive map or a new style of consciousness—to show how *Fight Club, American Psycho,* and *Blonde* each function as an experimental, postmodern attempt to address, resist, and engage with the intensification of neoliberalism at the end of the century.

Postmodernity, according to Jameson, "has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perpetually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world" (44). These three texts each present a new way of understanding subjectivity within the context of the contemporary neoliberal society. All three novels are firmly centered on a single individual's movement through, and response to, the postmodern condition and it's through this journey that each author challenges our own consciousness and the construction of reality.

Jameson equates late capitalism and postmodernism as inextricably bound together—the cultural dominant emerging out of the economic dominant. For Jameson, the globalized economy that emerged out of the 1980s and into the 1990s erased the residual anxiety of the modernist period and now the individual subject succumbs to death through fragmentation. So it is of no surprise that all three protagonists in these three texts manifest a tension between assembling a complete and meaningful individual identity out of fragmented thoughts, experiences, and environments. Faced with the totalizing effects of the neoliberal economic system each individual subject craters under the pressure of living in a perpetual present, in what Jameson sees as the inability to locate oneself or to "unify the past, present, and future of our own

biographical experience or psychic life" (27). Interestingly, as a response to the flattening of the postmodern subject, each protagonist's consciousness fractures into either a split-personality, or manifests as schizophrenia, or in some cases both. Jameson characterizes the disintegration of the self as a "shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology…characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject" (63). Similarly, Jameson argues that one of the most significant indicators of the postmodern moment is "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" (60). I intend to show that all three novels precisely embody what Jameson describes as the fragmentation, depthlessness, and superficiality of the subject and how this functions as a critique of neoliberal liberation of the individual.

Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, published in 1991, charts the schizophrenic merging of the real, the hyperreal[4], and fantasy into a disorienting narrative. In the novel, Patrick Bateman's superficiality and narcissism borders on the extreme, if not the pathological or socio-pathological. The narrator struggles to reconcile the contrast between his life as a Wall Street yuppie with that of a serial killer as he becomes increasingly disoriented, confused, and paranoid. Unable to map both his internal self and his external environment he descends into a hopeless state of despair. Additionally, all of the major characters in *American Psycho* function as interchangeable avatars of each other, highlighting their depthlessness through

[4] Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* will prove useful here. In *American Psycho* Bateman becomes trapped in a hierarchy of signs rendered meaningless through saturation. The novel takes the prestige of the commodity to such an extreme that object displaces the subject, to the point that "there is no real" (Baudrillard 107). The absence of the real is replaced by the hyperreal, or "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality (Baudrillard 1). For both Bateman and the reader, it becomes increasingly difficult to locate a distinction between what is real and what is not real, what actually happens and what is merely fantasy.

interchangeability. Although there is a general sense of alienation and self-centeredness manifest in all the characters, they all represent the flattening effect of late capitalism.

Similarly, Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel *Fight Club* traces the extended uncovering or discovering of an unnamed narrator's split-personality; that of a daytime insurance adjustor and a nighttime hyper-masculine alter-ego. The narrator regularly acknowledges his own inauthenticity, the superficiality of his life, and constantly refers to himself as a fake. As a coping mechanism for his insomnia, he unconsciously splits his psyche to both overcome his own feelings of superficiality, but also to advance an alternative—a new cognitive map—to resist the alienation of the neoliberal model. His alternative mode of being devolves into fascism, ultimately leaving the reader in an unresolved state of confusion.

In contrast Joyce Carol Oates's 2001 *Blonde* inverts the pattern of the other two novels by constructing a complex, intelligent, and driven character in a fictionalized version of Marilyn Monroe. Joyce Carol Oates imagines Monroe as an authentic, though troubled, personality and then explores the consequences of others forcing a commodified superficiality onto the victimized subject. Whereas the other two novels consider the destruction or fracturing of identity, *Blonde* explores how identity is constructed, or rather the construction of an identity that is not your own. The novel then explores Monroe's often futile search for love, companionship, and self-respect in a world focused only on exploiting her as a commodity.

Though Jameson will be a theoretical undercurrent throughout this project, Fukuyama, Brown, and Harvey's theories of neoliberalism's economic, social, and cultural impact, particularly on literature of the millennium, are now also being explicitly addressed by more contemporary scholars. In *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, Mitchum Huehls references Harvey's materialist, economic definition of neoliberalism when he writes that

“neoliberalism as an economic project, grounded in the free-market principles of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, initially designed to “restore the power of economic elites” after 1970s stagflation signaled the demise of post-war embedded liberalism” (2). Huehls contends that neoliberalism, especially with regards to its influence on culture, has progressed through four phases: the economic, the political-ideological, the sociocultural, and the ontological. He suggests the economic phase aligns closest with both Harvey’s materialist, economic centered definition as well as some of the earliest postmodern literary reactions to it in the 1970s and 1980s. However, for the purposes of this project I’m most interested in his assessment that during the 1990s “neoliberalism expands more granularly into the sociocultural and ontological fabric of everyday life, and thus into the very structures and forms that writers use to make sense of the realities they represent, construct, and imagine” (Huehls 3). Huehls continues, “the Clinton-Blair nineties mark a more granular extension of that ideology to previously noneconomic domains of human life” (7). Locating this ideological shift in the nineties effectively aligns with each of these novels as they represent cultural output from the beginning, middle, and end of the decade. Therefore, I maintain that *Fight Club, American Psycho,* and *Blonde* provide evidence for Huehls’s contention that neoliberalism is embedded deeply enough into culture so as to start manifesting in contemporary art and literature. And though Huehls contends that neoliberalism’s sociocultural turn in the 1990s marks the waning of postmodernism, I would argue these novels bookend the decade and all three possess fundamental postmodern characteristics like unreliable narrators, temporal distortion, fragmentation, paranoia, lack of resolution or meaning, and a factioning or blurring of the lines between the real and the historical.

Furthermore, Huehls contends that as neoliberalism achieves a totalizing grasp on both the Western economy and culture, therefore becoming a hegemonic mode of discourse both socio-culturally and ontologically, the "advent of neoliberalism can be understood to initiate a broad shift toward realist fiction in the early 1990s" (13). Discussing the so called New Sincerity authors of the 1990s and early 2000s like Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith, David Eggers, and David Foster Wallace, Huehls adds, "the turn to realism occurs once neoliberalism no longer needs innovative or speculative forms to anticipate its implementation" (13). Again, while I would agree that by the end of the Clinton administration neoliberalism had clearly become the dominant mode of discourse, not all literary fiction of the time simply conceded to the ontological dominance of the market. While there may have been a move to more realistic fiction, or what many theorists now call post-postmodernism, there are still numerous examples of experimental, innovative, and speculative forms of fiction directly addressing the economic, social, and political effects of globalization.

Ironically, in *Post-Postmodernism* Jeffrey Nealon argues both for and against what Huehls calls the post-postmodern turn to realism in response to neoliberal suppression of experimentation and innovation. Nealon uses Fredric Jameson's eponymous essay "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" as the foundation and starting point for his analysis and performs what he sees as a updated reading of the current cultural climate—a climate he argues has actually intensified and concentrated capitalism beyond Jameson's original research. Nealon writes "that over the past thirty years in the US, the major shift in economic and cultural terrain is within "capitalism" itself—which is no longer exactly the same things it was in the 1980s" (12). Nealon periodizes the 1980s as extending for approximately twenty years, from the election of Ronald Regan in 1980 until roughly the events of September 11, 2001. Similar to

Harvey's thoughts about the ascendant dominance of neoliberal policies during the same time, Nealon characterizes these two decades as the distillation and intensification to the extreme of neoliberal policies. Speaking of the present in contrast to the 1980s, Nealon writes, "To put my concern baldly, it seems to me that much North American humanities "theory" of the present moment is essentially stuck in and around the "the '80s"; and perhaps the easiest and most effective way of breaking that spell is to try and think economically as well as culturally about the differences between the two periods" (14). While Nealon is writing about how theory is mired in the 1980s and calls for a cultural analysis of the present through the vehicle of accelerated economics, I would push back on this assessment as the three novels I've mentioned were already performing this kind of analysis from within the historical period that Nealon characterizes as the 1980s.

Nealon suggests that Jameson's idea of cultural periodizing only occurs after the end of an epoch as the critic looks back on history. Likewise, Nealon references Derrida's thoughts on the same concept, in that "it is precisely from the boundary of a historical period, from inside its continuing end or closure, that one might hold out some retroactive or retrospective hope of naming what happened there" (10). While it is impossible to simultaneously critique a historical period "from inside" and to retroactively look back at the same period, I do think these cultural texts are a reaction to the present and open up other possible interpretations of the past. For example, by using historigraphic metafiction Joyce Carol Oates's *Blonde* critically engages contemporary issues like misogyny, sexism, and gender inequality, while at the same time undermining the nostalgia of the golden age of Hollywood. In both content and form, *Blonde* signals what Huehls calls neoliberalism's granular expansion into the "fabric of everyday life"

(3), but also offers a historical reimaging of the past, an alternative to Nealon's "what happened here" (10).

So, throughout this project I want to employ Jameson's thoughts on the intensification of capital into what he determines is a dizzying barrage of images and cultural production that requires a new cognitive map for decoding; as well as Nealon's thoughts on how this same intensification has only become more pervasive and more concentrated. Just at *Fight Club, American Psycho,* and *Blonde* bookend the decade of the 1990s, both Jameson and Nealon's theories on postmodernity bookend the critical discourse surrounding literary culture from the 1980s to the 2000s.

I intend to show that each novel functions as a postmodern reaction to the neoliberalization of American culture in the 1990s. Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, though gratuitously violent and misogynistic, rather compellingly satirizes the excesses of the 1980s and yuppie culture and ironically makes a more convincing argument against the absurdity of unrestricted free markets and individual freedom. Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* tries to resist the metanarrative of infinite progress and capitalist consumption, but ultimately fails due to the self-centered privilege of the narrator and his inability to fully reject materialism or anarchy. And finally Joyce Carols Oates's *Blonde* provides an alternative to the other two texts by exploring the same themes as *Fight Club* and *American Psycho*, but through a woman's perspective and then exposing what happens when she becomes the object of commodification—a product for the neoliberal culture to consume.

American Psycho: Neoliberalism and Nihilism

When Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* was published in 1991 it was met with a wave of harsh criticism and hostile reactions from publishers, reviewers, and critics. Written during the George H.W. Bush presidency and the waning years of the Moral Majority, a novel meant to satirize the excesses of 1980s Wall Street and yuppie culture was widely panned as transgressive, gratuitously violent, pornographic, immoral, and an affront to the family value ethos of the time period.[5] One need look no further than the *New York Times Book Review* of Roger Rosenblatt titled "Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get away with Murder?" as well as a host of similar reviews to understand the initial critical response to the novel. However, as the 1990s wore on and some of the gross excesses of the 1980s were exposed and amplified by the economic recession of the early 1990s, the initial hostile reaction to *American Psycho* gradually subsided and was replaced by a contemporary discourse centered on how the vehicle of extreme violence and misogyny underscored an intensely accurate deconstruction of the Wall Street excesses of Reagan presidency. Likewise the critically acclaimed movie version of *American Psycho* with Christian Bale as Patrick Bateman served an important role in the novel's rehabilitation from horror porn to poignant satire as both texts explore how the violent excesses of the protagonist becomes a metaphor for the material excesses of the 1980s.

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[5] The mid to late 1980s are considered the golden age for the wholesome family sitcom, including "The Cosby Show," "Family Ties," "Full House," "Growing Pains," and "Family Matters" to name a few. For a comprehensive study of the family values ethos of the 1980s, particularly on television, see Alice Leppert's *TV Family Values: Gender, Domestic Labor, and 1980s Sitcoms.* In the book she examines how these shows "neatly-organized…largely fantasy scenarios offered pedagogical models for organizing family life" and challenges the one-dimensional "guidelines for the organization of family life" (2-3) as well as the conflict between those lifestyles and American values of free-market capitalism and individualism.

However, much of the scholarly debate surrounding both the novel and the film centers on precisely this; how the themes of masculinity, narcissism, and violence are natural expressions of capitalist excess but often overlook some of the more subtle methods Ellis employs to mock the economic, political, and cultural atmosphere of the time period.[6] David Eldridge in "The Generic American Psycho" touches on the nuanced balance between the novel's reputation for violence but also poignant, enduring satire. Eldridge explains the novel was "met with an extreme critical reaction which sought to discredit the work entirely. Over time, of course, the novel's reputation has improved. Indeed, the hostile reception itself inevitably marked *American Psycho* as a text in need of rehabilitation, and in academic circles it is now often regarded as a postmodern classic" (19). Though academically rehabilitated, when the main protagonist is a violent serial killer it becomes difficult to view the novel through any lens other than one centered on murder.

Murder and mayhem notwithstanding, I would argue that in *American Psycho* Ellis gives an early reaction to the material and financial excess of the 1980s, as well as offers resistance to some of the ideological promises of the neoliberal utopia guaranteed by the Regan and Thatcher administrations. Contrary to offering real freedom, the economic system Bateman finds himself trapped in requires a life focused solely on maintaining static perfection, but with no real underlying value. Rather than enjoying his financial success and privileged lifestyle, Bateman finds himself increasingly alienated from people and society, futility searching for meaning in the extreme.

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[6] Much of the scholarship on *American Psycho* focuses on the themes of violence, masculinity, and sexual perversion. For a summary of the public outrage and critical dismissal see David Eldridge's "The Generic American Psycho" and Casey Moore's "We're Not Through Yet: The Patrick Bateman Debate." For a discussion of violence and masculinity in the novel see Carla Freccero's "Historical Violence, Censorship, and the Serial Killer: The Case of "American Psycho" and Berthold Schoene's "Serial Masculinity: Psychopathology and Oedipal Violence in Bret Eason Ellis's "American Psycho."

American Psycho tells the story of Patrick Bateman, a handsome, wealthy, narcissistic, 27 year old investment banker in New York. Presented as a series of stream-of-consciousness vignettes the novel explores themes of 1980s yuppie culture, extreme materialism, consumerism, Wall Street finance, and late capitalism as well as Bateman's descent into murder and nihilism. The novel operates simultaneously, if not schizophrenically, on two levels. The first is the surface level of Wall Street finance and the extreme decadence of the finance boom of the 1980s. Bateman goes to great lengths to catalogue the clothes, restaurants, tastes, and excesses of both himself and his colleagues, including entire chapters relating morning hygiene routines, apartment and office decorations, stereo systems, the hottest restaurants and nightclubs, and extreme, nearly gratuitous, descriptions of what everyone is wearing in every scene. The extensive itemizing of objects results in a flattening of the characters of the novel, where everyone functions as a manifestation of the same person, hence the constant confusion of people's names and identities. In the novel, characters often call each other by the wrong name and are constantly trying to identify faces in crowds, usually to no avail. However, the novel also operates on a darker, more transgressive plane as it traces Bateman's mental deterioration—as his material consumption accelerates so does his violent, sadistic behavior. Initially his violent outbursts are simple attacks or stabbings, but as he loses control the murders become increasingly complex, horrific, brutal, often blurring the lines between sex, violence, fantasy and reality, leaving the reader to wonder if these acts are truly occurring or merely the fantasies of a deeply troubled individual. The novel climaxes in a scene reminiscent of a 1980s action movie, where Bateman goes on a shooting spree killing random innocent victims, as well as police officers and security guards all while stealing cars and scrambling to evade a police helicopter. At the conclusion of his highly questionable escape he leaves a voicemail for his attorney

confessing to all of his crimes, including the murders of prostitutes, girlfriends, homeless beggars, and a colleague from his firm. Nothing comes of his confession, however, as his lawyer suspects Bateman was playing an elaborate joke and the novel ends with no resolution, just Bateman and his friends sitting in yet another trendy bar discussing banal topics like clothes, etiquette, and politics. Regardless of whether the brutal murders actually happened or if they were products of Bateman's hallucinatory alter-ego, it's obvious to the reader that Bateman cannot escape the materialism and consumerism of modern capitalism. Trapped in a hell of surface appearances and alienation, Patrick Bateman roams the streets of New York searching for some kind of experience to give meaning to his empty life devoid of real emotion and authentic relationships. But surrounded by automatons who are all merely copies of one yuppie archetype, even his extreme acts of transgressive violence fail to grant him any catharsis due to the narcissism endemic in the culture of the 1980s. In a culture where everyone is totally self-absorbed, his murder and mayhem goes unnoticed.

Using Fredric Jameson's "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" and Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* I want to argue that *American Psycho* is a postmodern reaction to the metanarrative of the neoliberal economic position. Rather than focus on the parallel between the intensification of consumption as it aligns with the intensification of sex, torture, and murder, I instead want to examine the occasions where Bateman attempts to convey real feelings, beliefs, or emotions. Bateman routinely tries to develop a sense of the real through monologues on contemporary issues that are playfully ignored, lengthy interludes of popular music deconstruction saturated with irony, and his relationship with his secretary who represents perhaps his most authentic connection with another person. These scenes all are expressed within a framework of postmodern temporal distortion, historical factioning, and

fragmented narration by a wholly unreliable narrator. And it is within this hyperreal world of Wall Street finance and banking that Bateman attempts to separate something of substance from the illusion of representation. In *American Psycho* the object has overpowered the subject and the simulacrum has replaced the original—all objects and people are simply copies of each other and Bateman's search for recognition ultimately results in nothing more than failed attempts at exerting freewill.

Ellis's intense scrutiny of both the material power of the object and the prevalence of the simulacrum in *American Psycho* flows perfectly from the cultural theory of the time, specifically Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard. In *American Psycho* the characters' relentless pursuit of the newest fashions, trendiest restaurants, hottest nightclubs, and technological gadgets aligns with Jameson's thoughts on the synthesis of commodities, aesthetics, and economics when he says "What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of every more novel-seeming goods, at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation" (5). In the cocaine-fueled, manic world of NY finance the yuppies embody this "frantic economic urgency" in a perpetual ballet of one-upmanship of who can procure the most prestigious objects, the most difficult reservations, and ultimate physical perfection. Further commenting on the progression of late capitalism in postmodernity, Jameson says "The first and most evident is the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms to which we will have occasion to return in the number of other contexts" (9). Nearly all of the characters in *American Psycho* emerge as flat and hollow, merely different iterations of the same person, hence the constant

mixing and confusion over names and identities.[7] They are superficial and narcissistic to the point of interchangeability.[8] This narcissistic depthlessness, or copies of copies, draws parallels to Jean Baudrillard's analysis of the relationship between reality, society, and the power of signs. In *Simulacra and Simulation* Baudrillard explores the idea that modern society is saturated with signs and images to such an extreme as to render it impossible to distinguish reality from imitation and meaningful from the meaningless. The process continues and "The closer one gets to the perfection of the simulacrum the more evident it becomes how everything escapes representation…In short, there is no real" (107) and therefore "less and less meaning ' (79). According to Baudrillard in late postmodern societies this creates a condition of hyperreality, where reality and fiction are synthesized to the point of rendering both indistinguishable from each other. In *American Psycho* this again explains why characters are constantly confused about identities, why real historical figures like Donald Trump and Bono move seamlessly in and out of the narrative, and, most importantly, raises the question of whether the murders really take place or if they are the elaborate hallucinations or fantasies of an unreliable narrator.

The novel opens with Bateman noticing the line from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, "Abandon hope all ye who enter here" (Ellis 3) scrawled in blood on the side of a bank. Dante's words on

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[7] In *Society of the Spectacle* Guy Debord elaborates: "In a society where no one can any longer be recognized by others, each individual becomes incapable of recognizing his own reality" (116).

[8] Likewise, Debord develops this digression of the subject from real to the appearance of real, especially with regards to the economic catalyst driving the process. He offers, "The first stage of economy's domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of being into having…The present stage, in which social life has become completely occupied by the accumulated productions of the economy, is bringing about a general shift from having to appearing—all "having" must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from appearances" (5).

symbol of commerce quickly frames the story as a hopeless journey through the landscape of Wall Street greed of the 1980s. And it immediately places the narrator hopelessly drifting in a capitalist dystopia. Ironically, it stands in contrast to the first descriptions of some of the major characters of the novel who appear to exist not so much in hell, but as elite players in a highly affluent, privileged socioeconomic demographic. Ellis gives careful attention in the opening pages to their exquisite tastes in clothes and food, their Ivy League educations, and their disdain for the poor and marginalized, particularly the homeless. And the class warfare between the upper and lower classes is regularly challenged by the recurring motif of *Les Miserables* appearing on signs, billboards, and flyers. This opening chapter places Bateman, his girlfriend Evelyn, and some other bank friends at a small dinner party where they incessantly pontificate over increasingly shallow topics paying little attention to each other, exemplified by Bateman ignoring an introduction to a guest but instead "noticing my reflection in a mirror hung on the wall—and smiling at how good I look" (11). However, in the middle of an alcohol and cocaine driven dinner conversation centered on trite content and self-aggrandizement, Bateman responds to his work colleague Timothy Price who jokingly asks a question about foreign policy by saying:

> Well, 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, work for a Middle East peace settlement, prevent U.S military involvement overseas. We have to ensure that America is a respected world power. Now that's not to belittle our domestic problems, which are equally important, if not *more.* Better and more affordable long-term care for the elderly, control and find a cure for the AIDS epidemic, clean up environmental damage from toxic waste and

> pollution, improve the quality of primary and secondary education, strengthen laws to crack down on crime and illegal drugs. We also have to ensure that college education is affordable for the middle class and protect Social Security for senior citizens plus conserve natural resources and wilderness areas and reduce the influence of political action committees. (15)

After a couple of short interjections consisting of short, terse, snappy dialogue, Bateman's monologue continues in this fashion for another full page concluding with "Most importantly we have to promote general social concern and less materialism in young people" (16). It's difficult to read these last few lines as irony even though everything up to this point has constructed a paradigm of extreme self-absorbsion, narcissism, and materialism. The reaction of the other characters also further complicates the uncertainty over Bateman's sincerity or possible sarcasm as they all slip back into a conversation about different flavors of sorbet. Bateman delivers a lengthy, eloquent speech about economic disparity, environmental and health issues, and foreign policy and the first reaction from "the table…facing me in total silence" is Evelyn saying "I have sorbet…Kiwi, carambola, cherimoya, cactus fruit and oh…what is that…Oh yes, Japanese pear (16). Though it would be easy to dismiss Bateman's extended thoughts on modern issues as sarcastic or a joke, I suggest it is one of the earliest signs in the novel that he recognizes his imprisonment in the hellish world of corporate banking and demonstrates at least some desire to transcend the shallowness of his current life. Nearly all of the extensive dialogue in the novel consists of short, hollow, surface conversations where no one really listens to anyone and instead waits for their turn to speak. However, Bateman's occasional lapses into social and economic philosophy show an articulate character who can be thoughtful, profound, empathetic, and self-aware.

Though Bateman occasionally interjects thoughtful comments or musings on deeper topics other than furs, health clubs, and summer homes, late in the novel he has two longer stream-of-consciousness ramblings that highlight both his desire to escape his life and his descent into madness, paranoia, and possibly schizophrenia. Also, as I mentioned in the introduction, this passage reinforces Fredric Jameson's argument that economic production and cultural production are inextricably linked, marked by Bateman's thoughts vacillating between financial acronyms and luxury goods. At dinner with Evelyn he says:

> …lost in my own private maze, thinking about other things: warrants, stock offerings, ESOPs, LBOs, IPOs, finances, refinances, debentures, converts, proxy statements, 8-Ks, 10-Qs, zero coupons, PiKs, GNPs, the IMF, hot executive gadgets, billionaires, Kenkichi Nakajima, infinity, how fast a luxury car should go, bailouts, junk bonds, whether to cancel my subscription to *The Economist*...whether someone could survive a fractured skull, waiting in airports, stifling a scream…surface, surface, surface, a Rolls is a Rolls is a Rolls…nuclear warheads, the total destruction of the world, someone gets beaten up, someone else dies, sometimes bloodlessly, more often mostly by rifle shot, assassinations, comas, life played out on a sitcom, a blank canvas that reconfigures itself into a soap opera. It's an isolation ward that serves only to expose my own severely impaired capacity to feel. (342-343).

By merging highly technical finance terms and acronyms with metaphysical ideas such as infinity, this passage not only highlights Bateman's dissociative thoughts but creates an interesting contrast or juxtaposition between his public, professional life and private anxieties. Also noteworthy is the hierarchy or progression of his thoughts, starting with what he knows and understands—capitalism, finance, markets—but dissolving into abstract ideas like nuclear war

(this is the 1980s), total annihilation of the world, and finally settling on his own isolation and detachment both from the world and from people. Baudrillard writes, "Meloncholia is the inherent quality of the mode of the disappearance of meaning, of the mode of the volatilization of meaning in operational systems" (162). The sign systems Bateman has used to construct his identity have been purged of value through over-representation leaving him unable to extract meaning from the real or the metaphysical. Baudrillard continues, "All Western faith…became engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to a depth of meaning, that a sign could be exchanged for meaning" (5). Bateman frantically grasps at the signs that previously guaranteed meaning for his life—stock offerings, LBOs, IPOs, executive gadgets—in a futile attempt to authenticate his reality; but realizes this "precession of simulacra" has left him isolated and unable to feel. This theme of unregulated individual consumption triggering an erosion of consciousness and a fragmented, dissociative mental state will emerge in precisely the same manner in the analysis of *Fight Club* .

In one of the final chapters of the novel titled "The End of the 1980s" Ellis brings some closure to both the end of the decade and the end of Bateman's confessions, but with a renewed sense of despair and hopelessness for the future. During yet another dinner at an exclusive restaurant, uninspired by the conversation Bateman drifts off into thought and his interior monologue proceeds:

> …in the southern deserts of Sudan the heat rises in airless waves, thousands upon thousands of men, women, and children, roam through the vast bushland, desperately seeking food. Ravaged and starving, leaving a trail of dead, emaciated bodies, they eat weeds and leaves and…lily pads, stumbling from village to village, dying slowly, inexorably; a gray morning in the miserable desert, grit flies through the air, a child with

> a face like a black moon lies in the sand, scratching at his throat, cones of dust rising, flying across land like whirling tops, no one can see the sun, the child is covered with sand, almost dead, eyes unblinking, grateful (stop and imagine for an instant where someone is grateful for something) none of the haggard pay attention as they file by, dazed and in pain (no—there *is* one who pays attention, who notices the boy's agony and smiles, as if holding a secret), the boy opens and closes his cracked, chapped mouth soundlessly…and somewhere else, above that, in space, a spirit rises, a door opens, it asks "*Why"*—a home for the dead, an infinity, it hangs in a void, time limps by, love and sadness rush through the boy…" (Ellis 379-80).

Not only does Bateman show empathy for the marginalized with his thoughts here, but this serves as reconciliation of his disdain for and abuse of homeless people throughout the novel. In the introduction I noted how David Harvey contends that at the core of neoliberalism is a restoration of class power and throughout the novel Bateman and his colleagues reinforce this idea by routinely harassing, demeaning, and hurling racist epithets at the homeless, who are often disabled and black. In striking contrast to the way he has previously abused minorities he now reflects on the plight of the starving in Africa in a way that parallels the plight of the homeless in America. Like the ravaged masses wandering the deserts of Sudan the homeless wander the streets of New York looking for food, shelter, and attention but both are ultimately ignored by passerbys. However, in a rare moment of reflection and deep self-awareness Bateman asks himself and the reader to "stop and imagine for an instant where someone is grateful for something" (380). Bateman and his friends exist in a system of extreme privilege and never once in novel express gratitude for their position in life or relative comfort, it's merely a foregone conclusion that the right parents, environment, and school precludes and guarantees success so

gratitude becomes unnecessary in a deterministic structure. In the world of haves and have nots, Bateman wants momentarily to stop, pay attention, and express gratitude. Unfortunately, the contrast between privilege, wealth, and comfort and that of extreme suffering collapses before evoking true feelings of sympathy or gratitude. This passage is immediately preceded by a conversation about briefcases and purses, and finishes with Bateman getting jolted out of his fantasy by the din of the restaurant, a ringing phone, and the people walking by and then abruptly transitions to a chapter on skiing in Aspen. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* Harvey writes that one of the critical problems with neoliberalism is that “A contradiction arises between a seductive but alienating possessive individualism on the one hand and the desire from a meaningful collective life on the other” (69). Clearly the ideals of free-market capitalism and narcissistic individualism create a paradox that make it impossible for Bateman to be grateful for his own privilege, transcend his own individual selfishness, and though he tries, unable to empathize with others.

In much the same way that Bateman expresses a desire for something more meaningful than mere surface materiality through his lengthy interludes on current social and economic issues, his incredibly long, complex, and thoughtful deconstructions of modern pop music deserves some attention. Often overlooked, or casually referenced as playful interludes on pop culture, the chapters on Genesis, Whitney Houston, and Huey Lewis and the News offer cultural insight into the fleeting popularity of commercial music while at the same time showing Bateman’s intense, but misdirected, need for experiences beyond the monotonous routine of his superficial yuppie lifestyle. Similar to his obsession with the trendiest clothes, gadgets, and restaurants Bateman looks for deep meaning in the most ephemeral cultural product.

Ironically he directs his intense and vigorous analysis toward the least complex, most overproduced genre of music—a genre that succeeds by constant recycling of themes, performers, images, and sounds that renders long term commercial success difficult, if not impossible. In *Post-Post Modernism* Jeffrey Nealon investigates the long-term resiliency of both classic rock and the classic rock radio format, noting how it has survived over five decades of aesthetics shifts in the music industry and yet still remains commercially viable and profitable. As an example, Nealon notes that in 2012 at his university (Penn State) the college radio station "programs mostly classic rock throughout the day because, so they say, it's what people want to hear" and posits the question "In a series of culture markets dedicated slavishly to "the latest thing" (industries like advertising, music, television), how can such decades-old popular songs remain this ubiquitous?" (43, 45). This stands in contrast to the artists that Bateman chooses for deep aesthetic scrutiny as the popularity of all three (Genesis, Whitney Houston, Huey Lewis and the News) waned after their commercial success in the 1980s. Describing the enduring stamina of classic rock Nealon argues, "What's changed most radically in culture at large is the very status of authenticity itself—or more precisely, the relation between consumption and authenticity. In the not-so-recent past, there was an outright antagonistic relation between commodity consumption and personal authenticity; the more you consume, the more you're like everyone else, the less authentic you are, mostly because you're simultaneously buying stifling social norms when you buy products" (56). Arguing that the continual need for consumer capitalism to reinvent itself with a regular influx of new objects, Nealon writes that classic rock's "rebellious, existential" (56) qualities foster resiliency in markets driven almost entirely by short term success. The broad appeal and uncomplicated nature of pop music lulls Bateman into the primary trap of the culture industry as defined by Adorno and Horkheimer, namely "the culture

industry consistently works on a bait-and-switch logic: it forces you to be satisfied by consuming rather than doing" (Nealon 200). Similarly "The culture industry…always separates the subject from what it can do, and in the process it levels all potential action onto the plane of consumption" (Nealon 200). Therefore, it is no coincidence that the rise of neoliberal principles of the 1980s birthed the explosive growth of the pop star and image based music videos through the vehicle of MTV.

In *Are We Not New Wave?: Modern Pop at the Turn of the 1980s,* Theodore Cateforis traces the arc of pop music in the decade but also delineates the market and cultural conditions that drove musical innovation and the pop style that Bateman seems obsessed with in the novel. Unlike Nealon's theories for the enduring stamina of classic rock, Cateforis underscores the "constantly renewing periodic phenomenon" (1) of popular music, particularly in the 1980s. Cateforis views the emergence of the new wave and pop sound of the 1980s as a reaction to the "tired clichés" of traditional rock music by focusing on "more accessible and novel songwriting sprinkled with liberal doses of humor, irreverence, and irony" and most importantly by returning to music with a "direct, danceable energy that had largely been abandoned" (2)[9]. And it is precisely this 1980s style of humor and irony Bateman embraces in his musical analysis. Bateman uses prominent and commercially successful 1980s bands for these musical interludes, which periodizes the culture he satirizes and the over-produced, synthetic sounds of pop music prove to be good material for an ironic deconstruction.[10]

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[9] It is worth noting that one of the most iconic scenes in Marry Harron's movie adaptation of *American Psycho* is Patrick Bateman dancing to Huey Lewis and the News explaining the significance of the band as he prepares to murder his colleague Paul Owen with an axe.

[10] In *Are We Not New Wave,* Cateforis draws a direct correlation between the resurgence of pop music in the 1980s with the rise of globalization, the "spread of mass produced synthetic products," and "the impending approach of a computerized society" (4).

Typically the pop music analysis chapters immediately follow a gruesome murder or extreme act of violence or torture, often with startling abruptness. After murdering a homeless man, Bateman launches the first of his failed attempts at locating something authentic through music in the "Genesis" chapter. Hailing the departure of Peter Gabriel from the band, who he describes as "too artsy, too intellectual," Bateman says the band could now leave behind the "complex, ambiguous studies of loss" and focus on creating "first-rate pop songs" (Ellis 133). As the analysis develops over several pages it becomes difficult to differentiate between earnest musical criticism and appreciation or what could be read as an extended bit of satire. Ellis weaves sincere, technical interpretation with puzzling commentary and questions like "Has the negative aspect of divorce ever been rendered in more intimate terms by a rock 'n' roll group?" (133). Likewise, other examples include Bateman showing an extensive knowledge of the band, deconstructing every album and every song, but then showing the relative shallowness of his knowledge by discussing a guest on a record as "some group called Earth, Wind, and Fire" (134). As this continues for several pages the effect is disorientating, shifting from irony to sincerity and back repeatedly, eventually foreshadowing the hopelessness of Bateman's passion for the real when he says of one track, "what makes this song so exciting is that it ends with its narrator never finding anything out at all" (134). Bateman's observation here provides an interesting bit of foreshadowing, as he never does find any kind of personal satisfaction or fulfillment and the reader is also unable to determine if any of this actually took place either, leaving both in an unresolved state.

Bateman reserves the most intense scrutiny for Genesis's album *Invisible Touch,* what he calls their masterpiece and "an epic meditation on intangibility…and the music is so beautiful that it's almost impossible to shake off because every song makes some connection about the

unknown or the spaces between people" (135). Again Ellis merges what appears as sincere respect for the band and their achievements in songwriting, craftsmanship, and production but then has Bateman conclude "I'm not alone in thinking" (136) Phil Collins's version of "You Can't Hurry Love" better than the Supremes' original. Though I'm sure Bateman is "not alone in thinking" the cover better than the original, most likely serious music critics would disagree and the irony here is obvious.

The second music chapter, dedicated to Whitney Houston, comes abruptly after Bateman murders an ex-girlfriend. This chapter takes a decidedly less satirical tone that the Genesis chapter, but still maintains allegiance to all the superficial nuances that make pop music popular and repeatable. Bateman pays sincere homage to Whitney's talent and voice, noting that "Whitney herself has a voice that defies belief…and Whitney's voice leaps across so many boundaries and is so versatile that it's hard to take in the album on a first listening" (253). However Ellis also has Bateman underscore the critical importance of production and songwriting for the aspiring pop artist by having him constantly draw attention to the name of the producer of each song and the songwriter, often someone other than Whitney. Bateman asserts that her album *Whitney Houston* is lyrically sophisticated and "The last thing it suffers from is a paucity of decent lyrics which is what usually happens when a singer doesn't write her own material and has to have her producer choose it" (253). The irony of course being Whitney Houston's self-titled *Whitney Houston* contain songs written by everyone but Whitney Houston. This draws a parallel between the manufactured pop star and Bateman's own privileged life as a Wall Street financier. Ellis makes a point throughout the novel to show how none of the executives at his firm, including Bateman, do any real work, but rather just show up and discuss suits, clubs, and restaurant reservations while collecting sizeable salaries. Ellis is by no means

saying that Whitney doesn't have talent, or that Bateman isn't intelligent (most serial killers are) he's simply pointing out the final product may be of more appearance than substance. Another interesting aspect of the Whitney chapter are the songs Bateman chooses to discuss and how they possibly relate to his own feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, and separation. As a man whose father is never mentioned, and has no substantive relationship with his estranged mother and brother, Bateman's favorite songs all emphasize love. He mentions Whitney's songs "The Greatest Love of All," "You Give Good Love," "Saving All My Love For You," "Nobody Loves Me Like You Do," "Love Is a Contact Sport," "For the Love of You," "I Wanna Dance with Somebody (Who Loves Me)," "Love Will Save the Day," and "The Greatest Love of All," which Bateman calls "one of the best, most powerful songs ever written about self-preservation and dignity" though "Michael Masser and Linda Creed are credited as the writers" (254).[11] This makes nine songs with love in the title in just two studio albums, representing half of the total songs. Not only does this showcase the pop marketability of love by exhausting every possible iteration of the emotion, but it exposes Bateman's longing for attachment to something other than objects, a rejection of the material for the emotional.[12] This also creates an interesting juxtaposition between Bateman's desire to feel love, though he can't express it, with Whitney's emotionally powerful expressions of love with words that are not her own. Bateman closes the

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[11] It is worth noting that after the publication of *American Psycho* Whitney Houston's "I Will Always *Love* You" (emphasis mine) became the best-selling single by a female artist in music history. Additionally two of her last studio albums were titled *My Love is Your Love* and *Just Whitney* and three of her world tours were named The Greatest Love World Tour, My Love is Your Love World Tour, and Nothing but Love World Tour.

[12] Though I don't intend to treat the topic of love— or rather the inability to love or be loved— with as much emphasis in the following chapters, it is also a recurring theme in both *Fight Club* and *Blonde*. As mentioned in the introduction Harvey equates the rise of neoliberalism with the erosion of social solidarity which is exemplified by all three protagonist's futile attempts to find authentic love.

chapter summarizing the final songs off of the *Whitney* album as a "powerful emotional statement of innocence lost and trying to regain the safety of childhood" and finally concludes by saying of a ballad Whitney recorded with her mother as "a combination of longing, regret, determination and beauty" (255, 256). This creates a strange paradox where a narcissistic, materialistic, self-centered character searches for identity, safety, and love in the music of a pop artist who self-referentially names all her albums after herself. In doing this, Ellis shows how in a hedonistic, ego centered culture it becomes impossible to locate the self.

The final music chapter comes after the most intense scene of the novel involving a murderous rampage and comically unbelievable police chase that ends in Bateman confessing all his crimes into the answering machine of his lawyer. The "Huey Lewis and the News" chapter, made famous in the *American Psycho* movie, includes the lengthiest and most thorough analysis of a band in any of the aforementioned chapters and also shows the extreme deterioration of Bateman's mental stability. The irony and satire are pushed to comically absurd limits analyzing with sincere earnestness a band whose success, though significant, was defined by and confined to the 1980s. While tracing the career arc of Huey Lewis, Bateman explains that the band was discovered by Elvis Costello and that Huey played harmonica on Costello's record "the thin, vapid *My Aim Was You*" (353)[13], which, much like the mistaken identities of the characters, the album is actually titled *My Aim Is True*. Again this underscores the theme of the novel that in a disposable culture saturated with images and signs everything becomes interchangeable and erased of meaning. Names, locations, and titles have no relevance in a culture where nothing is

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[13] The irony here being that the "the thin, vapid" *My Aim Is True* is considered one of the greatest albums of all time and named one of the best albums of 1977 by *Rolling Stone*, 168th of the 500 best albums of all time *Rolling Stone,* and *Pitchfork* called it the "most impressive debut in pop history."

truly unique or original, where “meaning is generated by the movement from signifier to signifier” (Jameson 27). Confusing the titles of albums and people demonstrates the “culture of the simulacrum…where exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value has been effaced” (18). Put another way, in a truly free market everything operates as representation, all objects are disposable or expendable, including art and people.[14]

Also, like the Whitney Houston chapter, Bateman perceives the ubiquity of love as the driving sensibility in pop songs. He says of the album *Picture This,* “They seem more concerned with personal relationships—four of the album’s ten songs have the word “love” in their title—rather than strutting around as young nihilists, and the mellow good-times feel of the record is a surprising, infectious change” (Ellis 354). Clearly this is no coincidence on the part of Ellis as all three musical interlude chapters contain artists whose oeuvre gives considerable attention to love and relationships, two experiences absent in the narcissistic vacuum of Bateman’s life. Like the

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[14] Although not part of the music analysis chapters, the interchangeability of objects and people is most obvious in the constant mixing up of names and identities throughout the novel. Nearly everyone refers to other major characters by the wrong name, either every time or occasionally, and people are constantly thinking they see people they know, especially celebrities, in crowds only to discover they were wrong. The most significant example of this confusion occurs between Bateman and a colleague he despises named Paul Owen, who confuses Bateman with another investment banker named Marcus Halberstam. Owen’s failure to recognize him as a unique individual both infuriates Bateman, but also creates the conditions that allow him to murder Owen. The scene leading up to the murder of Owen touches on all of these themes: Bateman makes a reservation under the name Marcus and pretends to be him for their dinner, Owen exclaims “Is that Ivana Trump over there?” (Ellis 215), and Bateman remarks how they are the same age, are dressed the same, have the same hair, and “My voice sounds similar to Owen’s” (Ellis 218). All of these coalesce into Bateman murdering him out of jealously then using Owen’s identity to commit further crimes. The parallels between Bateman’s frustration with not being recognized and Hegel’s lord and bondsman dialectic are striking. Hegel writes “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged” (549). Therefore the inability to find meaning in a neoliberal society rests firmly on the deification and isolation of the individual. Unrecognized, the individual is unable to construct meaning as part of a community, thus the breakdown of the social order in *American Psycho*.

other two mentioned above, the Huey Lewis chapter devotes most of the attention to their most commercially successful effort, *Sports*, what Bateman calls a "flawless masterpiece" (353). Bateman astutely observes how image obsessed music videos are now the driving force in the music industry, as looks, style, and appearance has displaced authentic talent in the early days of MTV. These insightful remarks on the change in the industry are juxtaposed with subtly ironic observations like how the song "Heart and Soul" is "a trademark Lewis song (though it's written by outsiders Michael Chapman and Nicky Chinn)" and the comically satirical reflection that "I Want a New Drug" is "the greatest antidrug song ever written" (355). The chapter seamlessly moves back and forth from sincere appreciation and serious interpretation to grandiose hyperbole about the importance and the enduring significance of the band. Most importantly, the chapter ends with an anecdote about the band's last album that mirrors the same false sense of accomplishment Bateman routinely overlooks in his own life. Referencing the album *Small World*, he says "It took something like a hundred people to put *Small World* together (counting all the extra musicians, drum technicians, accountants, lawyers—who are all thanked), but this actually adds to the CD's theme of community and it doesn't clutter the record" (359-60). Bateman's own life takes a similar small army to sustain—maids, gyms, manicurists, facials, dry cleaners, suit designers, and secretaries. However, like the band getting all the credit and glory for their artistry, though much of the product results from anonymous contributors, Bateman can only understand his success and privilege as the epitome of neoliberal, individual success.

The closest Bateman comes to recognition of his own privilege and the closest he comes to recognition of someone other than himself is through his relationship with his secretary Jean, who he regularly tells the reader "is in love with me" (105). Unlike his relationship with the other interchangeable characters who wear the same clothes, frequent the same places, and went

to the same schools, Bateman's connection with Jean transpires in a context totally removed from the rest of his life. All of their interactions involve just the two of them, and though they are of unequal socio-economic status, Bateman shows an uncharacteristic vulnerability when they are together. As if freed from the obsessive need to perform and embody capitalist consumption at all times, with Jean he feels comfortable saying things like "I just want to have a meaningful relationship with someone special" (263). In contrast to all his other relationships, with Jean he feels no need to "make anything ridiculous up" (263). After dinner one night he says:

> And though it has been in no way a romantic evening, she embraces me and this time emanates a warmth I'm not familiar with. I am so used to imagining everything happening the way it occurs in movies, visualizing things falling somehow into the shape of events on a screen…But my embrace is frozen and I realize, at first distantly and then with greater clarity, that the havoc raging inside me is gradually subsiding and she is kissing me on the mouth and this jars me back into some kind of reality and I lightly push her away." (265)

Everything in this scene functions as a contradiction of the rest of his life—that of the individual moving through an infinite present focused solely on self-gratification. However, he has no ulterior motive of deception with Jean, does not use money or gifts to lure her into anything against her will, recognizes mutual feelings in an Other ("a warmth"), and though he originally understands their embrace through images, signifiers, and movies his thoughts eventually pivot to reality and his current lived experience.

Late in the novel Bateman has his final dinner with Jean. By this point his mental state is tenuous and his murdering and drug use have reached an apex. During dinner his mind vacillates between present awareness and fragmented hallucinations but a question from Jean sends him

into a deep, existential, and introspective crisis. After telling him “people need each other” she asks, “Haven’t you ever wanted to make someone happy?” (373). Up to this point in his life his own narcissism, driven by the neoliberal mantra of individual success, has led to a preoccupation with his own happiness and meeting his own needs. Now, faced with the idea of a relationship based on mutual trust and sacrifice, amplified by Jean declaring her love for him, Bateman has an epiphany about the hopeless trap of illusion he can’t escape from. He rejects the relational depth and meaning Jean insists is possible, saying “Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in” (375). Unable to establish any real connection with Jean, even though he tries, Bateman reverts back to the superficiality that has been the driving force in his adult life.

Realizing he’s trapped in a hopeless cycle of consumption and dissatisfaction, he eventually ejects even his own reality and individuality when he says “…there is an idea of Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours…*I simply am not there*” (Ellis 376-77). Ellis then comes full circle and finishes with the same ethos of nihilism and hopelessness that the novel opens with. Bateman echoes the sentiments of Dostoyevsky’s Underground Man, declaring “My pain is constant and sharp and I do not hope for a better world…there is no catharsis…There has been no reason for me to tell you any of this. This confession has meant *nothing*” (377).

Ultimately the novel comes full circle with Bateman sitting with his colleagues in a bar trapped in a hell from which he cannot escape. He has neither been held responsible for his crimes and murders nor has he transcended the shallow life of a 1980s Wall Street banker. And similar to how the novel opened with Dante and the line about abandoning hope it closes with “above one of the doors covered by red velvet drapes in Harry’s is a sign and on the sign in

letters that match the drapes' color are the words THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" (399). At the close of the 1980s for Bateman, and for Ellis, there is no escape, no exit, from the spectacle of consumerism, materialism, and commodity fetishism plaguing the United States at the end of the century. Bateman unsuccessfully tries to overcome the alienation of the individual agent in late capitalism through failed attempts at sincere discourse and genuine relationships, but as we will see in the following chapters on *Fight Club* and *Blonde*, it has become increasingly difficult establish authentic human connections in contemporary society.

"I don't want to die without a few scars": *Fight Club*, Fisticuffs, and Free Markets

In a recent interview Noam Chomsky was asked what he considers the greatest threat to Western democratic ideals. Similar to Harvey's arguments about class warfare mentioned above, Chomsky contends the rapid ascent of Western neoliberal economic policies during the late 1970s and all of the 1980s—primarily those of Ronald Regan and Margaret Thatcher—has led to more intense forms of class warfare, income inequality, and concentration of wealth among elites. According to Chomsky, neoliberalism is cleverly disguised as the most efficient path to individual freedom, but the result of these economic policies has paradoxically led to an existential malaise. He says, "If you ask yourself what this era is, its crucial principle is undermining mechanisms of social solidarity and mutual support and popular engagement in determining policy. It's not called that, it's called freedom" (Chomsky 3:40). For Chomsky the erosion of economic, social, and cultural solidarity driven by the ideal of individual gratification has "systematically weakened people to become more passive and apathetic and not to disturb things too much and that's what the neoliberal programs do" (5:50). It is in response to this notion of neoliberal malaise and apathy sparked by the erosion of social solidarity that I wish to do a reading of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club.*

In 1996, Chuck Palahniuk, an unknown author at the time, published *Fight Club,* his first novel. Upon its release, the novel was widely labeled as transgressive, too violent, toxically masculine, and politically subversive.[15] Many critics had strong negative reactions to the novel's

[15] Much of the critical discourse on both *Fight Club* the novel and the movie centers on the use of violence, masculinity, terror, and the physical body. For an extended discussion of these topics see Henry Giroux's "Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders: 'Fight Club,' Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence;" Olivia Burgess's "Revolutionary Bodies in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*;" Mark Pettus's "Terminal Simulation: "Revolution" in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*;" and Caroline Ruddell's "Virility and Vulnerability, Splitting and Masculinity in *Fight Club*."

themes of violence, fascism, and political insurgency. The Moral Majority, somewhat neutered by the Clinton administration, still advocated for both a politically and morally conservative government agenda. Likewise, the Republican controlled Congress, led by Newt Gingrich, had both a House and Senate majority from 1995-1997. During that time they unveiled their Contract with America, and held hearings on video game violence and explicit song lyrics. The release of the novel also coincided with events that shaped the economic, social, and cultural unrest taking place in the mid-90s, including the Waco siege, the Unabomber arrest, the Olympic park bombing, and the Oklahoma City bombing. These conservative attitudes coupled with a growing sense of anxiety over domestic violence exposed and intensified some of the more problematic themes of novel.

However, regardless of the tepid critical reception, *Fight Club* was one of several novels in the 1990s to underscore what Chomsky refers to as the passive and apathetic individual adrift in an ocean of his/her own freedom. Using Fredric Jameson's theory of late capitalism and the "interrelationship of culture and the economic" (xv) in "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" I intend to perform a reading of *Fight Club* that probes the elements of the novel that react to and resist the cultural and social forces at play in a post-industrial society. Ultimately I aim to show that Palahniuk's attempt to undermine the rampant consumerism, narcissism, and materialism of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as construct an alternate narrative for resistance, actually falls short and instead reinscribes that which he argues against. The narrator fails to recognize his own privileged position within the context of class struggle, his solipsistic view of the world reinforces his own elitism, and his failed suicide attempt leaves the two opposing narratives unresolved.

Jean-Francios Lytoard famously defined postmodernism as an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv) and this “incredulity” toward the metanarrative of late-stage capitalism is what informs Palahniuk’s narrative in *Fight Club* and what motivates the protagonist/antagonist in the novel to envision an alternative that returns man to a more natural state. Similar to *American Psycho*, *Fight Club* tells the story of an unnamed, everyman narrator struggling with insomnia provoked by his dissatisfaction his life, the lack of meaning provided by his job and possessions, and an inability to connect with other people. The mundane life of a traveling insurance recall adjustor has dulled his emotions and desensitized him to nearly everything but television and IKEA catalogs. His doctor, after admonishing him for not understanding what real suffering entails, advises him to visit a testicular cancer support group to gain perspective on the relative comfort of his own life. The narrator discovers that by fraudulently impersonating the sick and/or dying he is able to connect on a physical and emotional level with others in the support groups who are truly ill and it provides temporary relief from his insomnia.

Soon after, the narrator meets Tyler Durden, an enigmatic, confident, masculine, drifter philosopher whose entire persona stands in contrast to the neutered, emasculated narrator. After discovering his apartment and possessions have been destroyed in an explosion, he moves into a dilapidated house with Tyler and starts a “fight club” where men bare-knuckle fight each other in bar basements and empty warehouses. The fight clubs give the narrator an intense, visceral experience that satisfies his desire for authentic experiences. However, as the clubs grow in number, Tyler uses it as the catalyst to start what he calls Project Mayhem, an anti-materialist, anti-establishment cult that uses increasingly destructive methods to sabotage businesses and spread disorder. Initially on board with these acts of corporate defiance, the narrator grows increasingly concerned with the escalating tactics of Project Mayhem. The plot reaches its

climax when the narrator discovers that he is, in fact, Tyler Durden, and that part of his personality manifested when the narrator was “asleep.” As his mental state deteriorates throughout the novel, Tyler gradually gains more power over the narrator’s personality and becomes increasingly destructive. The narrator discovers Tyler’s last act of terrorism is to martyr himself while blowing up a bank building, also killing the narrator. Ironically, the narrator realizes the only way to stop the anarchistic scheming of Tyler is to kill himself, and kill Tyler in the process.

Often fragmented and disorientating, *Fight Club* essentially outlines one man’s quest for meaning in a superficial and commodified society. His search for authenticity manifests itself through a three stage progression for the narrator. First is his awareness of the cycle of dissatisfaction endemic to capitalism. Fredric Jameson contends that late capitalism no longer follows the classical formulas of industrial production obtained through class struggle, but instead focuses almost exclusively on cultural consumption, images or copies of images (simulacra), and what he considers “the purest form of capital yet to have emerged, a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas” (36). For example, the narrator works at job he is ambivalent about in order to make money to buy things that provide temporary relief from boredom. Then, when those things become obsolete or unstimulating, it necessitates their replacement, and the cycle continues. Second, and also incorporated within this cycle, is the idea that modern life meets all of our basic survival needs with regards to food, clothing, and shelter while the rest of consumer behavior follows a cycle of distraction to preserve the status quo. The novel asks the reader what happens after survival is handled. If basic needs are met with relatively low energy expenditure, then life becomes focused on simply maintaining a level of static homeostasis or equilibrium. However, the novel fails to delve into or explore the vast

globalized supply chain, often at the expense of the labor force of marginalized nations that allows for the relative homogenous comfort of modern urban life in the United State. This ultimately leads to the final dilemma of the novel. If all of this is cleared away, then who or what is left? The intent of *Fight Club* is to strip the participants of their clothes, shoes, jewelry, and all other outward displays of identity and reduce them down to two equal states of nature. The club breaks the attachment to objects from the modern world and reconnects the participants to the natural world. Though Palahniuk's nostalgic return to a more natural state of man appears to liberate the narrator from the anxiety of middle management and middle class, the path to this utopian freedom can only be achieved through nihilistic destruction, individual selfishness, and by teaching "each man in the project that he had the power to control history…[to] take control of the world" (Palahniuk 122). Jameson warns that when "you constitute your individual subjectivity as a self-sufficient field and a closed realm, you thereby shut yourself off from everything else and condemn yourself to the mindless solitude of the monad" (15). So, rather than resisting a system that glorifies individual subjectivity, the narrator inadvertently reinforces it by romanticizing the unlimited power of the independent, natural man. In *American Psycho*, Bateman simply concedes defeat to the system, whereas in *Fight Club* the narrator will unsuccessfully endeavor to become a sort of natural, Nietzschean superman.

However, before Palahniuk even develops the idea of the ascent of the natural man or expands on the themes of violence, masculinity, and anarchy, he establishes the narrator's dissatisfaction with the underlying consequences of neoliberal policy. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* David Harvey notes that "the founding figures of neoliberal thought took political ideas of human dignity and individual freedom as fundamental [and] these ideals appeal to anyone who values the ability to make decisions for themselves" (5). Harvey also argues that

“human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills with an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (7) and “The assumptions that individual freedoms are guaranteed by the freedom of the market and of trade is a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking” (7). Early in the novel, the narrator hints at his growing dissatisfaction with these “individual freedoms” and expresses frustration and resentment for the objects he’s accumulated participating in a free market. Mirroring Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho,* the narrator goes into specific detail cataloguing the items he has acquired in an effort to manufacture a utopian space within the walls of his condominium. Fredric Jameson anticipates this intensification of commodity fetishism and the frequent cataloguing of possession when he writes, “What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel seeming goods…now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation” (5). His job and his possessions define, distract, and anesthetize him to a point he’s no longer fulfilled by his quest to achieve career success and collect household things. The narrator underscores the relative sameness of his life with that of everyone he knows, saying:

> I wasn’t the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue. We all have the same Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern…We all have the same Rislampa/Har paper lamps made from environmentally friendly unbleached paper…The Alle cutlery service. Stainless steel. Dishwasher safe. The Vild hall clock made of galvanized steel, oh, I had to have that…It took my whole life to buy this stuff. (Palahniuk 43-44)

The list continues on for another page, highlighting how even though everyone has comparative degrees of freedom and choice, they all end up with the same hollow life—"a copy of a copy of a copy" (21).[16] In "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," Jameson maintains that commodity worship has intensified to the point where the actual commodity is not the focus, but has mutated into the "consumption of sheer commodification as a process" (x). Not only are all these objects copies with no original—since everyone owns the same thing—but the consumers purchasing them are also copies of each other. The narrator certainly embodies Jameson's thoughts as each individual thing has no inherent value for him; he finds meaning only in what it represents and how everyone participates in the exact same process. Here again, the individual freedom to consume doesn't lead to utopian bliss, but something more akin to dystopian conformity. And, during the description of his condo, the narrator realizes the market freedom that allowed him to acquire all these objects has also consumed all his time and energy—"his whole life" (Palahniuk 44)—and likewise is causing his insomnia.

Furthermore, rather than differentiating him as a unique individual, the contents of his home mimic those of everyone he knows—none are distinct or special. Clearly recognizing the pattern of discontent and the temporary, fleeting comfort of retail therapy, the narrator admits, "You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple years you're satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you've got your sofa issue handled"

[16] It might seem obvious, or even gratuitous, to mention Jean Baudrillard's theories of representation in *Simulacra and Simulation.* He argues we have replaced reality with signs and symbols and can no longer differentiate between the authentic and the copy, the meaningful from the meaningless, or reality from a simulation. Baudrillard writes "To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have" (3). These copies of copies negate the individuality neoliberalism supposedly guarantees. This surfaces repeatedly in *American Psycho,* where nearly every major character is just a slightly different representation of the same copy and where the main character, Patrick Bateman only likes copies (tapes) of music and movies because he cannot tolerate a real experience.

(Palahniuk 44). Trying to isolate at least some tangible meaning from his possessions, the narrator distills his entire existence down to a piece of furniture—an object that will fade out of style in a few years. Finally succumbing to the futility of a never-ending search for authentic meaning, he concedes, "Then you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you" (44). And as a final metaphor for his loneliness and depression, he compares the emptiness of his life with that of his refrigerator. Remarking how he has collected shelves full of mustard and over a dozen kinds of salad dressing he acknowledges, "I know, I know, a house full of condiments and no real food" (45). His condominium, his refrigerator, and his life are full of things, none of which relieve his anxiety, depression, or his insomnia. His life is simultaneously full and empty—full of things, empty of meaning.

However, his assessment of his own disappointing predicament does little to challenge the hegemonic discourse of late capitalism. Bordering on the self-absorbed and solipsistic, the narrator merely inventories his own apartment and projects it outward as a universal constant for his peer group, what he refers to as "The people I know" (43). This may or may not be true, as the reader only has access to his thoughts and no frame of reference for the peer group he describes as copies of copies. Compare this to the obsessive, if not hysterically grotesque descriptions of what everyone is wearing, what everyone owns, and where everyone eats that permeates nearly every page of *American Psycho*. Patrick Bateman not only obsesses about himself but also everyone else such that the sheer volume and totality of the relentless parodying more effectively critiques the irony of yuppie culture against the neoliberal promise of individuality and freedom of choice. *American Psycho* proves that all players in the game of Wall Street finance are copies of copies, whereas the narrator of *Fight Club* simply laments and projects his own privilege outward.

Nevertheless, Palahniuk continues to build on the idea of things owning you as anything but liberating by having the narrator deconstruct all the promises of neoliberal freedom, and he begins with one of the first social and economic challenges of young adulthood. The narrator reflects, “My father never went to college so it was really important I go to college. After college, I called him long distance and said, now what?” (51). Instead of valuing education or seeing college as a gateway to maturity it simply serves as an item on an economic checklist for success. Within this system, every adolescent or young adulthood benchmark loses importance as it is solely engineered to reproduce consumers. This “now what?” exchange between father and son gets repeated at every critical life stage, all following a pattern of doing what he was supposed to do, or what he had been convinced was the next logical step in life. Matthew Arnold once observed that “freedom is a very good horse to ride, but to ride somewhere” (Harvey 6). The constant refrain of “now what?” exposes the potential for drifting through life arriving at checkpoints, but with no actual destination. Each successive accomplishment—school, work, money—should provide both a sense of achievement and reinforce the importance of individual freedom, but instead leads the narrator down an endless path of temporary comfort, but not ultimate self-consciousness. Ironically or not, he references his level of education and success as unsatisfying, but his lack of awareness to his own privilege comes across as whiny, mildly arrogant, and perhaps unappreciative. The entitlement of passing through critical life stages and having the luxury of asking “now what?’ and ultimately reaching a point where “my life just seemed too complete” (Palahniuk 53) implies a detachment from those faced with a more difficult life journey.

However, this path of temporary comfort and completeness leads the narrator to compartmentalize his life as a coping mechanism for his overwhelming isolation. Speaking of his

career, the narrator observes, “You do the little job you’re trained to do” (12). Later, he explains, “I do my little job…Tiny life. Tiny soaps. The tiny airline seats” (156). The language both minimizes the size and importance of his education and his job. In *The Postmodern Condition* Francois Lyotard remarks that “The transmission of knowledge is no longer designed to train an elite capable of guiding the nation towards its emancipation, but to supply the system with players capable of acceptably fulfilling their roles at the pragmatic posts required by its institutions” (48). So, not only is it a little, insignificant job but he reduces the allure and romance of travel to an endlessly repetitive cycle of tiny hotels, tiny food, and a tiny life “fulfilling” his role in the institution. And not only does he determine his own job unfulfilling, but the narrator also projects his own feelings of detachment onto the rest of the working world, observing how everyone risks “quick death in offices where every day they felt their lives end one hour at a time” (Palahniuk 121). Referring to his generation as “the middle-children of history,” he declares, “Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don’t really need” (141). This realization and proclamation operates both on an individual level and on a societal and cultural level. The narrator realizes his own place within an alienating system of Sisyphean toil, but also understands that for society to function everyone else has to participate equally in the same struggle. Everyone has bought into the idea that ultimate individual freedom can emancipate all participants equally and that the interests of the individual supersede the welfare of any holistic community. If every person achieves individual fulfillment, then social solidarity should manifest as a natural byproduct. The narrator is unaware of his own blind spot here as he concludes individual satisfaction leads to social cohesion, which is precisely the opposite of what David Harvey describes as the effects of neoliberal policy. However, even though he misunderstands the isolating effects of his individual freedom, the

narrator concludes many others (generations) have a similar awareness of their own disconnectedness and mortality.

This awareness of his own mortality, acknowledged by the oft repeated line, “On a long enough timeline, everyone’s survival rate drops to zero” (Palahniuk 176) serves as the impetus for pursuing more intense, extreme, and dangerous experiences. He begins to challenge himself, the other members of fight club, and with statements and questions such as, “This is your life and it’s ending one minute at a time” (29) and “what will you wish you’d done before you died?” (144). Up to this point he wrongly assumed that the freedom promised by neoliberal ideals created the conditions for self-consciousness and fulfillment, but he now understands that if he died he really accomplished nothing other than merely existing. Ultimately, he concludes, “I just don’t want to die without a few scars” (48). He no longer wishes to preserve the idyllic appearance of a perfect reality, he wants to experience the ugliness of authentic life, even if the consequences are violent or gruesome. And for him, the only way to truly experience authenticity is to declare war on the culture. He proclaims, “We don’t have a great war in our generation or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture” (149). This is epitomized by the understanding that “[o]ur culture has made us all the same” (134).[17] With no world war or economic disaster to unite each individual into a cohesive effort, the narrator observes that now the homogenizing effect of culture, more specifically the hegemonic mode of neoliberal economic discourse, has dissolved society back into individual compartments.

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[17] See Jameson in *Postmodernism*, “The first and most evident is the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense…”(9).

Highlighting this individual compartmentalizing of urban life, the narrator describes his home as “a condominium on the fifteenth floor of a high-rise, a sort of filing cabinet for widows and young professionals” (Palahniuk 41). Though the narrator creates a convenient visual image here of a condo as a filing cabinet, it unfortunately does little to subvert or address any kind of class struggle in a system he tries to reject. His own home becomes a metaphor for an economically segregated society where the pursuit of individual affluence and personal possessions leads to isolation from others and from the self, with everyone existing in their own separate drawer or compartment. Ironically, this creates a space where hundreds of people live together but separately, echoing a neoliberal economy where everyone lives within borders of the state or a country but works to satisfy individual interests. In the end, the narrator concludes the only practical solution is to blow up the apartment building, thus blowing up his possessions, his identity, and the socio-economic system causing his pain and loneliness.

In *The Postmodern Condition* Jean-Francois Lyotard states, “The harmony between the needs and hopes of individuals or groups and the functions guaranteed by the system is now only a secondary component of its functioning. The true goal of the system, the reason it programs itself like a computer, is the optimization of the global relationship between input and output—in other words, performativity” (11). By blowing up his apartment and, therefore his identity, the narrator begins to explore the ontological question of how to exist in a world where basic survival is handled and how to reject standardized performance within that system. Similar to asking his father what to do at major life crossroads, the narrator wonders how to find his true self after years of futility searching in a world where every need has already been met. Prior to erasing his previous existence, he remarks, “At the time my life just seemed too complete, and maybe we have to break everything to make something better of ourselves” (Palahniuk 52). He continues,

stating, “May I never be content. May I never be complete. May I never be perfect” (46). Channeling Lyotard’s “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxxiv) the narrator abandons his belief that constant progress, incremental gains, and material accumulation will eventually lead to an ultimately satisfying end. His pursuit of perfection along with the belief that at some point everything will align into a utopian endpoint has left him exhausted and directionless. The narrator now understands and internalizes that there is no dialectical process, no final end to history that will result in a permanent state of satisfaction. In contrast to Fukuyama’s argument that through a centuries long dialectical process of economic refinement we have finally arrived at the end of history, the narrator realizes this has led to nothing but a permanent state of consumer dissatisfaction.

However, the mere fact that he can reject the idea of being too content or too complete demonstrates his obscured view of his own reality. The ability to remake himself both implies privilege and undermines the oppressiveness of his perceived situation. If the narrator currently has the freedom to deconstruct his own identity and reimagine it then why the need to create Project Mayhem and disrupt the system? The narrator seems to reject Lyotard’s assessment of the postmodern condition as one where, “Identifying with the great names, the heroes of contemporary history, is becoming more and more difficult…Each individual is referred to himself. And each of us knows that our self does not amount to much” (14-15). For the narrator, however, he still believes his “self” contains a revolutionary superhero who can “can take control of the world” (Palahniuk 122).

In order to take control of the world, however, the narrator has to subconsciously reimagine himself as some kind of Nietzschean superman through the creation of his ultra-masculine alter-ego, Tyler Durden. After the narrator symbolically kills himself and his identity, Tyler resurrects

him as a new man free from everything that burdened him about his old life. Tyler tells the narrator, "It's only after you've lost everything…that you're free to do anything" (Palahniuk 70). And in a long monologue reminiscent of a spiritual guru or Buddha, Tyler says:

> Disaster is part of my natural evolution toward tragedy and dissolution…I'm breaking my attachment to physical power and possessions because only through destroying myself can I discover the greater power of my spirit…The liberator who destroys my property is fighting to save my spirit. The teacher who clears all possessions from my path will set me free. (110)

Tyler thus dismantles the economic metanarrative of neoliberalism as part of the natural evolution of mankind. In contrast to a neoliberal system based on market freedom, accumulation, consumption, and a narcissistic exploration of the individual self, Tyler envisions true freedom as a monastic rejection of possessions, property, and culture. Tyler contends that rather than embracing the tragedy of life and what will be an eventual and unavoidable death, we placate that fear of death and the unknown with trite, meaningless objects and activities. For Tyler, class privileges and social inequality produced by market forces prevent the narrator (and society in general) from transcending the economic order and from attaining any kind of spiritual enlightenment. Only after embracing the unknown, confronting fear, and acknowledging death can the narrator attain true freedom. This manifests itself in the novel through several scenes where either Tyler or a member of Project Mayhem puts a character in a traumatic situation and forces him to decide what he has wished he had done before he died. The process of resurrection, therefore, can only start with a metaphorical death and then reconstruct a new life with real value and true meaning. The problem with this resurrection and liberation of man from culture is that

Tyler's methods have the opposite effect. Instead of empowering the individual he creates an army of "space monkeys" to carry out his attacks on culture.

Tyler executes these attacks through a fascistic creation he names Project Mayhem, a collection of disenfranchised men he programs to be his "space monkeys" (Palahniuk 141). David Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, accurately predicts this insurgency and suggests that new, younger generations will grow increasingly dismissive of some of the more fundamental problems of neoliberalism (mainly class warfare, corporate privileges, and income disparity) and the potential for rejection or revolt (think Occupy Wall Street) would increase (81). In *Fight Club*, once the initial stimulation of men simply fighting to add meaning to otherwise tedious and boring lifestyles wears off, Tyler starts looking for ways to more purposefully subvert the economic and social order. As the fight clubs metamorphosize into Project Mayhem, the disaffected members of the program start to carry out acts of domestic terrorism on the United States. Their actions start small, with things like subversive and satirical bumper stickers or playful pranks on the elite at parties or country club gatherings. However, as Tyler conditions and brainwashes his Project Mayhem disciples, the acts of defiance progress from petty to destructive to murderous. Ironically the conditioning and brainwashing of the Project Mayhem applicants mimics the homogeneity of the middle-class the narrator resents so strongly, the culture that "made us all the same" (Palahniuk 134). Tyler runs the program like "a Buddhist monastery" (130), where everyone wears the same clothes, and "each guy is trained to do one simple task perfectly…Pull a lever. Push a button" (130). In *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, Mitchum Huehls writes that contemporary literature "frequently tries to resist neoliberalism, struggling to innovate epistemologies that might escape it" (15) but likewise often "capitulate to neoliberalism, working complicity with it" (15). So the question is

how effective is the attempt to dismantle the establishment with the same players that participate in and uphold the establishment? Specifically discussing Western democracies, Harvey writes, “The mood in these democracies is one of helplessness and anxiety, which helps explain the rise of a new brand of populist politicians. This can easily turn into a revolt” (81). Like a stereotypical cult leader, Tyler capitalizes on the disaffected youth mired in jobs they hate and exploits their anxiety and helplessness by conditioning them to not just reject the system but attempt to overthrow it. As the narrator’s insomnia worsens, Tyler’s ego slowly begins to overshadow the narrator’s true self-consciousness and transforms Project Mayhem from merely disruptive into something bordering on fascism and finally into something completely nihilistic. This is precisely the progression Harvey hypothesizes will happen when individuals respond to the destruction of social solidarity. He writes:

> The anarchy of the market, of competition, and of unbridled individualism (individual hopes, desires, anxieties, and fears; choice of lifestyle and sexual habits and orientation; modes of self-expression and behaviours toward others) generates a situation that becomes increasingly ungovernable. It may even lead to a breakdown of all bonds of solidarity and a condition verging on social anarchy and nihilism. (82)

Tyler’s social anarchy and nihilism realized through the transgressive acts of Project Mayhem should come as no surprise though. All of his references to loss, self-destruction, death, and the returning of man to nature foreshadow his progression from nuisance to anarchist to nihilist. As the narrator’s ego runs amok, Tyler embodies Harvey’s thoughts on the disaffected youth in a late capitalist society. Harvey writes, “There is also a burgeoning anarchist movement among the young, one wing of which—‘the primitivists’—believes that the only hope for humanity is to return to the that stage of hunter-gathering that preceded the rise of civilization and, in effect,

start human history all over again" (186). Tyler echoes this primitive return to nature when he declares in his new utopia "You'll hunt elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center, and dig clams next to the skeleton of the Space Needle" (124). This is precisely what Tyler intends to do; start human history all over again but on a smaller scale by using his space monkeys to blow up a building that he hopes will collapse on top of a national museum, thus erasing history so he can write his own.[18]

However the narrator finally decides that the consequences of erasing history by bombing a skyscraper are too significant and too deadly and the only way to prevent the attack is to kill himself thus killing Tyler Durden. And herein lies the most significant failure of the novel—the botched suicide attempt of the narrator. While not trying to undermine the artistic merit of the novel or its creative assessment of the anxiety of the time, I would argue that by not actually successfully ending his life the narrator neither rectifies his predicament as a consumer trapped in a cycle of dissatisfaction, nor successfully terminates the fascistic motives of his alter-ego Tyler Durden. After he tries to kill himself the narrator wakes up in the hospital where "somebody brings me my lunch tray and my meds and he has a black eye or his forehead is swollen with stitches and he says: "We miss you Mr. Durden" (208). If the goal was to make a statement against the perils of consumerism and materialism, and likewise condemn anarchy and terrorism as the only path to freedom, then by saving the narrator as well as continuing Project Mayhem, the novel fails on both fronts. Jean Baudrillard succinctly explains this paradox in *Simulacra and Simulation* when he remarks, "Because it would be beautiful to be a nihilist, if

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[18] See Francis Fukuyama's essay "The End of History?" where he argues that, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, Western liberalism (neoliberalism) has emerged as the triumphant economic system with no challengers left. In contrast to Tyler's urge to destroy a museum, Fukuyama says "In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history" (17-18).

there were still a radicality—as it would be nice to be a terrorist, if death, including that of a terrorist, still had meaning" (163). At the end of the novel the narrator still exists as a player in the game of American consumerism and by botching his suicide he fails to eliminate the fascistic threat of his alter-ego, Tyler Durden.

In the afterword of the 2005 edition of *Fight Club*, Palahniuk discusses the success of the novel and of the cult status of the movie. He references how during press tours or interviews everyone had an opinion as to what genre the novel was, ranging from science fiction to satire to horror, but no one ever suggested it was a romance. He discloses his real purpose for the novel was that of a modern adaptation of *The Great Gatsby,* where an apostolic survivor lives to tell the story of his hero and an ill-fated love triangle. The updated version of *The Great Gatsby* in *Fight Club* reflects the same themes, but filters them through the lens of neoliberalism. The opulent mansion and decadent parties of Jay Gatsby are replaced by meticulously appointed condominiums and underground boxing clubs, yet both novels still offer a skeptical take on the American dream of materialism and individual triumph. And in the same way that Nick Carraway concludes that wealth never brought true contentment to Gatsby, the narrator of *Fight Club* realizes that the institutional framework of neoliberalism never brought true freedom.

However, before Palahniuk mentions his true motive for the novel, that of a turn of the century Gatsby, he discusses the surprising success of the book. In a long passage reminiscent of the narrator's very first inventory of his apartment, Palahniuk lists all of the post-*Fight Club* pop culture references and cultural influences the novel had. He writes:

> Before Donatella Versace sewed razor blades into men's clothing and called it the "Fight Club look." Before Gucci fashion models walked the runway, shirtless with black eyes, bruised and bloodied and bandaged. Before houses like Dolce and Gabbana launched

> their new men's look—satiny 1970's shirts in photomural patterns, camouflage-print pants and tight, low-slung leather pants—in Milan dirty concrete basements…Before the band Limp Bizkit bannered their Web site with "Dr. Tyler Durden recommends a healthy dose of Limp Bizkit"…Before the *Weekly Standard* announced "The Crisis of Manliness"…Before the University of Pennsylvania hosted conferences where academics dissected *Fight Club* with everything from Freud to Soft Sculpture to Interpretive Dance… (Palahniuk 211-212)

This self-congratulatory archive, propelled even further into cultural landmark history by the cult status of the film version starring Brad Pitt as well as two sequel novels, a comic book series, and a vast merchandising empire, shows that somewhere along the way the novel in many ways became a part of what it allegedly resisted. What started as a reaction to the numbing influences of materialism and consumption ultimately succumbed to the Jamesonian late capitalist reciprocal "feedback loop…of the culture and the economic" (xv), trapped by both and transcending neither.

"You play until you have nothing left to lose": How a mythologized past informs the present in Joyce Carol Oates's *Blonde*

Just a few years prior to the 2000 publication of Joyce Carol Oates's *Blonde*, she wrote a short piece for *Time* magazine about the sudden and tragic death of Princess Diana. In the article she touches on how the royal family, as well as the media, constructed the image of a virginal, pure, and white princess, ironically noting how Diana, in Greek mythology, was the patroness of virgins and goddess of the hunt. However, Princess Diana would end up as the one ultimately hunted to her death by an insatiable media, what Oates called "those human jackals[19] known as paparazzi" (1) who after her death "gloated over their prey: the bitterly ironic end of the hunt" (1). Starting from the end—the deadly car accident—Oates reflects back on the social, political, and cultural devices used to construct the myth of Princess Diana. Noting her complete lack of agency in the process Oates explains the princess was "required to be virginal in every sense…to be ignorant of the very conditions of her marriage…[and] was intended as a sacrifice to the Establishment" (1).

The idea that Diana was plucked from obscurity for possessing the right attributes (beauty, submissiveness, virginal) both highlights the contrast between the role she was to perform—that of quiet, subservient princess, wife, and mother with little autonomy—and what she desired for her own life. Oates notes that Diana was "a complete romantic, and she was saving herself for the love of her life, which she knew would come one day" (1), concluding that all of the eventual drama and catastrophe of her life had only to do "with her desperate search for love…to be loved

[19] In *Blonde* Oates regularly refers to male characters in positions of power, whether studio executives, photographers, or government agents as jackals. Many of the allusions to jackals evoke the predatory nature of the movie industry, especially as it pertains to male power hunting and exploiting female beauty.

for what I am" (1). The tension between performing the role for which she was constructed and the desire to be loved for who she was, created the impossible paradox of pleasing everyone and herself simultaneously. However, Oates concludes that even though her death was a tragedy at the hands of a cold, uncaring royal family that "used" her up and a predatory media that hunted her until the end, Diana still became "the most celebrated glamour icon of our time" (1) with a "significance for women that approaches the mystical" (1). Oates writes:

> In Diana, the fairy-tale princess who was cruelly awakened to the world of hurt, betrayal and humiliation, women of all ages found a mirror image of themselves, however magnified and glamourized. In her ordeals, in the courage, stubbornness and idealism of her attempt to reinvent herself as an independent woman, women have found a model for themselves. It was this Diana, stronger for her own suffering, heroic for all that she was vulnerable, with whom women will continue to identify. (1)

Just four years after writing this article Joyce Carol Oates released the novel *Blonde* in 2000. With Blonde, Oates switches characters, from Princess Diana to Marilyn Monroe, but continues to explore and elaborate on the same themes, namely the construction of (in this case an American) myth, the search for identity in a performative world, the desire to be loved as an authentic self, the exploitation of women by misogynistic men in power, a ravenous media, and ultimately the victimization and tragedy inherent in a culture of consumption. Similar to how Diana transcended her life as a disgraced royal to assume mythic status as a glamour icon, Marilyn Monroe transcended the tragedy of her short life as a movie star and pinup model to become the ultimate, enduring sex symbol of the post-World War II American era.

Blonde reimagines the life of Marilyn Monroe in what Oates characterizes as "a radically distilled "life" in the form of fiction, and for all its length, synecdoche is the principle of

appropriation" (vii). The novel traces the life of Norma Jean Baker from early childhood, through her transformation into Marilyn Monroe, and up to the final hours before her death on August 4th, 1962. In encyclopedic fashion, Oates weaves together biography, fiction, non-fiction, historical, as well as imagined events to explore the machinery behind the creation of an American icon as well as expose the shame, self-hatred, and destructive capacity behind the deprivation and malevolence of a misogynistic and exploitative entertainment culture.

Blonde begins and ends with death, opening with Death as a young bicycle messenger delivering an object from her past that will trigger the final events of her young life at the end of the novel. In between is a relatively chronological narrative of her life, permeated by flashbacks, multiple points of view, and a dizzying array of characters, both real and imagined. Starting with her childhood in Los Angeles the novel probes her troubled relationship with her mother, her time in and out of foster homes, and early failed marriage, the creation of her identity as Marilyn, and the impact of performing that role on her life, health, career, relationships, and the drug addiction and dependency that would lead to her eventual demise. At times biographical and at other times wholly fictional, *Blonde* functions as a reflection on the twentieth century interpretation of the American dream as Marilyn's life intersects with entertainment, sports, politics, culture, crime, religion, and capitalism. To imagine a single life on such a grand scale, with such mythic implications, Oates said she tried to think of Monroe as "as my *Moby Dick* the powerful galvanizing image about which an epic might be constructed, with myriad levels of meaning and significance" (Showalter 1). And in the words of one reviewer "*Blonde* is a true mythic blowout, in which Marilyn is everything and nothing—a Great White Whale of significance, standing not for the blind power of nature but for the blind power of artifice" (1).

Allusions to Melville notwithstanding, *Blonde* erects the artifice of Marilyn Monroe as a mythic symbol and metaphor for a post-war culture obsessed with images, celebrity, and fame. At the behest of powerful men looking to exploit her beauty for wealth and publicity, Norma Jean Baker transforms herself into an object of desire through a litany of changes to her physical appearance, including bleaching her hair, ghost like makeup, tight clothes, and adopting a childlike whispery voice. As a foster child she longs for family, security, a Daddy, stability, and most of all love and a sense of wholeness. However, the economic forces of consumer culture shatter her desire to be a complete person, reducing her to a ghost merely performing for the men who use and abuse her. Monroe spends most of her life searching for a fairy tale ending, what she envisions as the romance between the Fair Princess and the Dark Prince, only to die alone, broke, and drug addicted. The historical and material circumstances of Monroe's life pull back the curtain and reveal the dark side behind the idea of American individualism, and shows what happens when a doomed individual succumbs to the power of a dominant society.

However, though the action of *Blonde* follows the timeline of Monroe's life from 1926 to 1962, most of the significant themes reflect a more contemporary sensibility. Published in 2000, Oates uses the tragic arc of Monroe's short life to examine the commodification of beauty, the performative nature of gender roles, the ubiquitous power of the image, the allure of celebrity, the hyperreality of Hollywood, and the plight of the female in a misogynistic culture. At the close of the millennium Oates postmodern novel uses the historical and mythic figure of Marilyn Monroe, the epitomized ideal of white beauty, to challenge our understanding of the American experience and serve as a harbinger of what could ultimately happen to an American culture obsessed with individuality, freedom, infinite progress and a relentless appetite for consumption and wealth.

To better understand how Oates uses postmodern literary techniques in *Blonde* to engage with and challenge the intensification of capitalism in the late twentieth century it's necessary to incorporate both Jameson's thoughts on the superficiality of a culture saturated with capital as well as utilize Linda Hutcheon's theories on historiographic metafiction and how knowledge of the present informs the past. *Blonde* critiques the erosion of social solidarity endemic to the rise of neoliberalism by using a historical figure from the past to interpret and examine contemporary ideology. Unlike *American Psycho* or *Fight Club*, where the protagonists are Jamesonian archetypes of superficiality detached from history and moving through an eternal present, by contrast *Blonde* inverts the pattern of the other two novels. Oates does this by constructing Marilyn Monroe as a complex, intelligent, driven character with an authentic personality and then explores the consequences of others forcing a commodified superficiality onto the victimized subject. Whereas Jameson considers our lost connection to history or the past as a symptom of our present condition that undermines political critique, Hutcheon, on the other hand, argues in *The Politics of Postmodernism* "through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (93). Hutcheon disagrees with Jameson definition of postmodernism as "a value-free, decorative, de-historicized quotation of past forms and that this is a most apt mode for a culture…oversaturated with images" (94). In contrast to Jameson's contention that pastiche only commodifies the present, Hutcheon insists that parody, irony, and intertextuality underscore the ideological slant of interpretation and can be used to question society's claims to totalizing discourse, dominant ideologies, and professed truths. Hutcheon, therefore, argues that historiographic metafiction is an important tool for dismantling the grand narratives that arise out of historical events, politics, and knowledge.

Therefore an interpretation of *Blonde* through the lens of Jameson's "Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism"[20] might focus on the fragmented, schizophrenic elements of her personality—she is two selves in one body, Norma Jean and Marilyn Monroe—as well as the superficiality of her persona as a constructed celebrity, but the focus on aesthetics and style would prevent opening up a dialogue about the how this characterization speaks about the present. While a useful lens through which to analyze and interpret *Blonde*, Jameson's ideas on pastiche and history don't support a contemporary understanding of the themes of Oates's novel. Since I intend to show how Oates's uses the historicity of Marilyn Monroe to resist the commodification of the individual and to challenge Fukuyama's assertion that we have reached the end of history and economic progress, Hutcheon's theories of postmodern historiographic metafiction provide a significantly more useful tool for exposing the contradictions and dangers of neoliberalism totalizing power over the economy and culture. Hutcheon concludes that "the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as "natural" (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact "cultural"; made by us, not given to us" (1-2). Therefore I believe that Oates uses the historical character of Marilyn Monroe to both highlight the creation or evolution of culture as not natural, but rather of our own design. Monroe becomes the vehicle through which Oates challenges the constructedness of the neoliberal position in late twentieth century and shows how it is an ideological position, and not a natural

[20] It is worth nothing that in Jameson's "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" he uses Marilyn Monroe as an example of superficiality inherent in late capitalism. He writes "The waning of affect is, however, perhaps best initially approached by the way of the human figure, and it is obvious that what we have said about the commodification of objects holds as strongly for Warhol's human subjects: stars—like Marilyn Monroe—who are themselves commodified and transformed into their own images" (11).

outcome as Fukuyama would suggest. Oates uses the tragic arc of Monroe's life as a metaphor for the tragic arc of a society consumed by artificiality, materialism, consumption, images, individual sovereignty at the expense of social solidarity, and finally oppressive systems of exploitation, wealth concentration, and imbalances of power.

For Hutcheon postmodernism breaks down the barrier between reality and fiction, or in the case of *Blonde* it blurs the line between history and fiction, and allows the reader to question the "modernist assumptions about closure, distance, artistic autonomy, and the apolitical nature of representation" (99). By transcending the barriers between reality and fiction and history Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction provides a foundation to critique contemporary culture. Speaking of postmodern film, Hutcheon remarks that it "does not deny that it is implicated in a capitalist mode of production, because it knows it cannot. Instead it exploits its 'insider' position in order to begin a subversion from within, to talk to consumers in a capitalist society in a way that will get us where we live, so to speak" (114). I want to argue that in *Blonde*, Joyce Carol Oates uses the historical figure of Marilyn Monroe as the culturally constructed insider from which she can challenge, subvert, and destabilize some of the challenges facing America at the turn of the century. By addressing the human role in constructing issues of sex and gender, Oates undermines the metanarrative of neoliberalism that Fukuyama contends has eliminated these very same economic, social, and political inequalities. Where Jameson sees capitalism (neoliberalism) and postmodern culture as inextricably bound together, hence the "cultural logic of late capitalism," Hutcheon argues postmodern works can effectively critique the culture from within.

To lay the groundwork for her critique of American culture Oates first shows Monroe was constructed as an American myth. Though the novel touches on all of the various parts—hair,

makeup, clothes, acting, persona, and style—that create the ethos of Monroe the "Hummingbird" chapter most completely demonstrates the dichotomy between Monroe's vision for herself and her identity and that of the studio executives. The chapter is written as a fragmented stream-of-consciousness diary entry describing every detail of the day she lands her first major movie role. The chapter begins with a hopeful tone as Monroe innocently and very naively believes she still possesses a degree of agency in her own career trajectory. At the beginning of the chapter she declares "I WILL INVENT MYSELF LIKE THIS CITY INVENTING ITSELF" (Oates 207) and admires herself in the mirror of the producers office: "I was smiling seeing the blonde in a dark-tinted mirror above a sofa in a white sharkskin suit that showed her young shapely figure & she looked good & this was what Mr Z was seeing" (Oates 210). Not only does Monroe foreshadow her own objectification by referring to herself in the third person, but Oates also tempers her enthusiasm in the early part of the chapter by alluding to some of the more predatory aspects of the film industry and capitalism in general. Monroe remembers how an old photographer named Otto Ose said "there will be new wars capitalism requires new wars always there is a War except enemies change"[21] (207) and in the first of what are several bird metaphors she remembers how "Three of Ana's hummingbirds this morning they must eat continuously or burn out and die" (208). The warning from Otto coupled with the observation on hummingbirds ominously foreshadows what will likely happen to Monroe as she becomes part of the machinery of Hollywood. Otto's words more directly address the economic needs of capitalism where there

[21] It is worth noting that Monroe's first film role came in 1950, only five years after the end of World War II and since then the United States has been involved in the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Invasion of Panama, two Gulf Wars, the invasion of Iraq, and the War in Afghanistan, as well as several other smaller international conflicts.

is a perpetual need for the new, whether it be wars, goods, services, or objects[22]. Likewise, the hummingbird more directly references the need for culture to have a continuous supply of new talent and new faces; the machinery of Hollywood has to continually consume new talent or else risk irrelevancy.

Before moving to the second half of the chapter that focuses on Monroe's transition from the innocent Norma Jean Baker to the sex symbol Marilyn, Oates shows how women specifically are trapped in this system of consumption. While looking at Mr Z's bird collection, what he calls his "collection set in a simulacrum of natural habitats" (Oates 211) Monroe observes that "the birds were beautiful & lifelike not seeming to grasp that they were dead I seemed to hear a voice like Mother's All dead birds are female, there is something female about being dead" (211). It is interesting that in a culture that obsesses over beauty and youth that Mr Z's aviary is not a collection of live birds, but rather birds trapped in an eternal state of the present, dead but unable to decay. Monroe appears to both recognize her own mortality when viewing these dead birds, but also seems to understand that once she signs a contract with The Studio she will be trapped in the same way the birds are trapped and she makes a final plea to herself, "Seeing me & with that look of a fellow captive Help! Help me" (212).

This plea, however, marks a shift in the chapter both in terms of Monroe's fleeting control of her own destiny and her grasp of reality. Her thoughts become more fragmented, as well as evoke a sense of temporal distortion as she cannot remember "How long we remained in the AVIARY amid the birds songs I could not say afterward…How long I remained in Mr Z's

[22] See Jameson: "What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods, at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation" (5).

company I could not say afterward" (Oates 212). Like looking at a bird trapped in a glass case, it is here, in a dreamlike state of confusion and horror, that Monroe allows the reader to see the results of her own transformation from Normal Jean to Marilyn. She says "There's a horror in happy-masks…(& my teeth aching from the retainer I must wear at night for my front teeth protruded a tenth of a tenth of an inch & must be corrected The Studio informed me)" (212). Monroe continues narrating the details of that fateful day, writing:

> I woke early & did my exercises & ironed this suit & showered only afterwards & applied Arrid to my underarms that are clean-shaven daily (though I know I have a tendency to grow moist when I am anxious) I have powdered myself with talcum powder smelling of lilac I have spent 40 minutes on my makeup & this sharkskin suit is not a tramp's costume is it? How cld you say such a thing not knowing me My hands are soft from the lotion & and my nails manicured & glamorous yet not showy, I think It is not my fault about the peroxide. I was ordered by The Studio to have my hair bleached "platinum blond" it was not my decision but I said nothing of course Mr Z regarded me bemused as you wld regard a trained dog or elephant or any freak. (213).

This passage has several interesting parallels with the "Morning" chapter in *American Psycho* where Patrick Bateman goes through a similar extensive cataloguing of his own morning hygiene routine. However it provides an interesting contrast as his regime is driven out of pure narcissism and self-indulgence and Monroe's is a consequence of trying to appear attractive for others and fulfill her role as an object of desire. Patrick Bateman aesthetic routine is driven by a desire to attract victims, and Monroe's unfortunately turns her into a victim.

This passage also draws attention to two important elements in the construction of the identity of Marilyn Monroe. First, Oates exposes the arbitrariness of the commodification of beauty both

through the trivialness of the dental work necessary to correct a tenth of a tenth of an inch[23] as well as the other physical changes she endures to appease the men in power. This creates a complicated juxtaposition of simultaneously trying to be unique and perfect, real and fake. Secondly, the passage clearly demonstrates how her identity was not a product of her own volition or desire, but at direction of men—Monroe is not only an artificial creation, but not even her own creation. Like one of the stuffed birds trapped in an eternal state of youth and beauty, The Studio constructed an object of desire by manipulating her physical body to achieve the blond bombshell ideal, ultimately reducing Monroe down to the level of an animal, "a trained dog or elephant or freak" (213).[24] In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* Linda Hutcheon remarks how a character in E.L. Doctorow's *Book of Daniel* recognizes that "He was not an actor in history, so much as an interpreter of the dreams of others, often remaining confused about his own" (137). Here too, Monroe now is no longer the author of her own history, but has been turned into a vessel to satisfy the artistic and economic dreams of studio executives and film directors and her fragmented thoughts reflect her confusion about her own identity and place in the process.

Finally, as the last step of the process of erasing her old identity and completing her dehumanization, the producer, Mr Z lays her down on the floor of his office and brutally rapes

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[23] Later in the novel while readying for the premier of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in a long passage detailing five hours of preparation Oates writes "The beauty mark was relocated by a tenth of a fraction of an inch, then prudently restored to its original position" (417). Not only does it take five hours to summon the façade of Monroe but the degree of specificity appears both arbitrary and gratuitous. And again, towards the end of the novel, Mr Z remarks, "Sure, we invented MARILYN MONROE. The platinum-blond hair was The Studio's idea. The Mmmm! Name. The little-girl baby-voice bullshit…No style, but Jesus was that little broad built! The face wasn't perfect so we had the teeth fixed, & the nose…MARILYN MONROE was a robot designed by The Studio. Too fucking bad we couldn't patent it" (633).

[24] Continuing the theme of grooming Monroe as one would a show animal at a point later in the novel Oates observes "She was being groomed for "stardom." It was a species of animal manufacture, like breeding" (281).

her. Evoking a scene similar to Princess Diana as the pure, virginal princess, Marilyn Monroe, dressed in white, is forced down on a white office rug, and becomes the virginal sacrifice to the Dark Prince of Hollywood. To combat the trauma she reflects back on her childhood, tries to make her eyes "go blind" and recalls the H.G Wells story of the Time Traveler as she attempts to block out what is happening. Nonetheless, Marilyn gets the part, not realizing that the sexual assault was the real audition, and immediately shifts perspective saying that this day was "the start of my NEW LIFE" (Oates 214). The last act before her transformation is complete, however, is to erase all remnants of her old identity, particularly her name Norma Jean Baker, which the producer and her agent said was "a hick name, an Okie name" (216). Monroe sits idly by while the men discuss her new name, in the way that a family would discuss naming a new pet. She interjects saying that "I tried to explain to them that I would like to retain "Norma" at least it was the name I grew up with" (216) but the men ignored her. Mr X, wanting an "MMMMM" sound as if Monroe was something to be eaten or consumed, eventually "snapped his fingers as if he'd only just thought of it himself & Mr Shinn & he pronounced in unison as in a movie Mari-lyn Mon-roe savoring the sexy murmurous sound of it" (271).

Reflecting on the plight of women through history, Hutcheon says "Without the right to vote, own property or be educated, wives, mothers, mistresses, daughters play the role of sweeps to history, as much a part of an anonymous support system to men of the left as to men of the right" (63). Here Monroe, now completely resurrected to serve the desires of men, understands the "role" she must play, both as part of the machinery of entertainment and as a "support system" to men. Internalizing the abuse and recognizing the significance of her transformation, Monroe conceded: "I told myself My new life! My new life has begun! Today it began! Telling myself It's only now beginning, I am twenty-one years old & I am MARILYN MONROE" (Oates 218).

Norma Jean misinterprets her new identity as Marilyn Monroe as a conscious shift in her own perspective, not realizing that her new name is actually the first step in her transition into what Hutcheon's characterizes as the anonymous support system to men.

The "Hummingbird" chapter represents a turning point in the life of Marilyn Monroe, and also a shift in the narrative from the early trauma of Monroe's childhood to a more focused critique of Hollywood culture specifically and capitalism generally. After the name change, *Blonde* concentrates on the Hollywood and media system that helped establish Marilyn Monroe as a film icon and sex symbol and profiles her downward spiral into a world of spousal abuse, drug abuse, and exploitation. Oates uses Monroe's disintegration to challenge the American myth of individual success, and with her downfall Monroe becomes a harbinger for what can happen to a culture dominated by male power, the desire for wealth, and an obsession with progress.

Likewise, the second part of the novel is where Linda Hutcheon's theory on the power of nostalgia to critically engage the present becomes useful. She writes:

> if nostalgia connotes evasion of the present, idealization of a (fantasy) past, or a recovery of that past as edenic, then the postmodernist ironic rethinking of history is definitely not nostalgic. It critically confronts the past with the present…Postmodernism questions centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed systems…The past is always placed critically—and not nostalgically—in relation to the present. The questions of sexuality, of social inequality and responsibility, of science and religion, and of the relation of art to the world are all raised and directed…at the modern reader. (Hutcheon 38, 45)

The deconstruction of Monroe in the second half of the novel incorporates both the intertextuality and the historiographic metafiction that Hutcheon describes here as a way the past

can challenge our understanding of history and engage the present. And through the tragedy of Monroe's life as a movie star, Oates questions the "totalized, heirachized, closed system" of Hollywood and exposes the destructive capacity of a system built on power, greed, and exploitation.

After her transformation into Marilyn Monroe the style of the novel and the characters undergo a change. Stylistically the novel begins to incorporate the aforementioned intertextuality with fragments of poetry, dialogue that reads like lines from a play, letters written and edited on typewriters, handwritten notes, and dizzying shifts in perspective and speaker. Likewise the novel blurs the line between actual historical figures, some named directly like Cass Chaplin or Clark Gable, and others left up to the reader to infer the identity, like the Ex-Athlete (Joe DiMaggio), the Playwright (Arthur Miller), and the President (John F. Kennedy).

By linking the epitome of an American sex symbol with three archetypes of American masculinity—the athlete, the intellectual, and the leader—Oates sets up paradigm of American exceptionalism through which she can subtly criticize the myth of American individuality and freedom. For example she characterizes Joe DiMaggio, the ex-Athlete as, "an American legend. An American icon…He was a man's man…He was a big tipper…He was one of the winners of the great American lottery, and he knew it…Yet he was lonely (Oates 377, 399). This characterization sets up an interesting parallel between the American icons of DiMaggio and Monroe. By this point both DiMaggio and Monroe are American legends, "winners of the great American lottery," but both are isolated and unhappy, simultaneously adored and lonely. Both DiMaggio and Monroe are idolized as symbols of American achievement, but the price of individual greatness appears to be a pervasive loneliness. DiMaggio and Monroe smile for their adoring fans, but it is a superficial mask hiding deeper anxieties.

Expanding on this theme of exterior confidence masking interior despair, Oates points out the superficial façade of Monroe's rise to fame proclaiming her the "booming heartbeat of a new world" (428) who was "perpetually smiling, yet without warmth or sentiment or the complexity of the spirit called "depth."…*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* was synthetic and brassy and overproduced, a triumph of glitzy vulgarity, a Technicolor cartoon about winning, American-style, and so it *was* a winner" (428). The loneliness of DiMaggio and Monroe, as well as the emptiness of Monroe's performances, reminds the reader of Jameson's thoughts on the postmodern subject: "The first and most evident is the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" (9) and "As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present" (15).

This superficiality and depthlessness is best represented in the chapter "The American Goddess of Love on the Subway Grating" where Oates recreates the scene of Monroe's most famous picture; the shot of her in all white standing over a subway vent that blows her dress up while she makes a feeble attempt at holding it down. Capitalizing on an American fear of the other Oates imagines:

> Now she's hugging herself beneath her big bountiful breasts. Her eyelids fluttering. Between the legs, you can trust her she's clean. She's not a dirty girl, nothing foreign or exotic. She's an American slash in the flesh. That emptiness. Guaranteed. She's been scooped out, drained clean, no scar tissue to interfere with your pleasure, and no odor. Especially no odor. The girl with No Name, the girl with no memory. She has not lived long and she will not live long. (473).

This chapter marks the shift in the narrative from the creation of identity, to the hollowing out of identity, to a critique of identity. As mentioned earlier, Jameson theorizes the postmodern condition as one of living in an eternal present, devoid of a past and without a future. Like the narrator in *Fight Club* who has no memory of his own alter-ego, and how Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* cannot remember names, times, and places or if his crimes ever really occurred, Monroe is also a "girl with no memory." Jameson explains this phenomenon as the "inability to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life" which leads to "a mysterious charge of affect, here described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality" (27). All three of these characters exist in a state of temporal distortion, unable to map their existence or locate themselves into a social order. Jameson calls this inability to map consciousness onto anything real the "alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment" (44). Monroe's perfectly manufactured aesthetic of white sterility, cleanliness, and beauty perhaps represents the epitome of Jameson's disjunction—she is nothing but body and image. But in *Simulacra and* Simulation Baudrillard warns that the perfectly constructed image can no longer represents anything real, and "In a way it is this statistical perfection that dooms it to death" (28). In much the same way, Oates has mapped the transformation of Monroe so as to function as a simulacra of the pure, ideal, sexualized American woman—a woman doomed to death— in order to frame her critique of contemporary American culture

Oates's critique draws upon Hutcheon's idea that "Postmodern intertextuality is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between the past and the present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context" (118) and "Through intertextuality, it is suggested that some noble myths have a capitalistic exploitation at their core" (134). The image of Monroe

on the subway grating synthesizes these ideas into a single, infamous photograph that makes her an object of pure exploitation. The ubiquitous image of Monroe not only evokes an image from the past still relevant in the present, but it allows Oates to link the two together and turn Monroe into a warning for her late twentieth century audience.

The primary vessel for this warning comes in the recurring use of Darwin's *Origin of Species* text that Monroe carries with her to movie sets in the later stages of her career. Her ex-husband, The Playwright (Arthur Miller), had "seen her reading Darwin's *Origin of Species* with such intensity you would think she was reading her own future" (663). There irony here being that of course the theories of Darwin applied socially or culturally foreshadow her own demise as the idea of continual progress over time is incongruent with an aging physical body. Monroe will get old, her body will not sustain its youthful beauty, and she will be replaced by the next, "girl with No Name, girl with no memory." Monroe understands that "the story of *Origin of Species* was things improving, more refinement in time, "reproduction with modification" for the better…Our nature consists in motion' complete rest is death" (655). So if true, her obsession with Darwin is, unfortunately, "reading her own future." The theory of continuous improvement, and infinite dialectical refinement creates an illusion of progress, but Oates uses the tragic downward spiral of Monroe to pose the question, at what cost? Sadly, as the director of her final film, *The Misfits* put it, "You play until you have nothing left to lose" (666). And in this social, political, and economic game of neoliberalism we play a similar game, one based on individual achievement at the expense of social solidarity or communal integrity or as David Harvey puts it the tension between "a seductive but alienating possessive individualism on the one hand and the desire for meaningful collective life on the other" (69). The consequences of this game or this tension, Oates cautions, could be drastic, severe, and total. Echoing Darwin's belief in "refinement in

time" Fukuyama assures us in "The End of History" that "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy is the final form of human government" (1) where "all prior contradictions are resolved and all human needs are satisfied" (3) by man "as essentially a rational, profit-maximizing individual" (4). However, Oates warns the reader that such a deterministic metanarrative based on the premise that history is natural dialectical evolution that will ultimately resolve into a final form carries considerable risk.

As Monroe breaks down, both from drug use and from being used by Hollywood, Oates strengthens the metaphor of her as a warning for the modern reader. In a hallucinatory, fragmented passage Monroe struggles to reconcile her own disintegration with the idea of natural progress. Monroe wonders:

> else in Hell we'd be created like we are NATURE is the only God I was craeted by NATURE as I am I mean I was created as this I was craeted crated kreated craeated as MARILYN & could not be anyone else from the beginning of TIME I believe in NATURE I believe I mean I am NATURE We are all NATURE You are MARILYN too if you are NATURE That, I believe We may look with some confidence to a secure future of great length & as NATURAL SELECTION works solely by & for the good of each being all corporeal & mental endowments will tend to progress toward perfection There is grandeur in this that from so simple a beginning countless forms most beautiful & most wonderful have been & are being evolved. (640).

Just as we saw with the protagonists in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* detach from a sense of time, place, and community, here too Monroe loses the capacity to locate her own identity as a product of nature or culture. Unlike the birds persevered in an eternal youthful state she fails to recognize that the natural selection of social Darwinism won't lead to progress or perfection for

her, but instead will only lead to her replacement. Like Marilyn, if we naively believe that we are on a natural path to perfection then we are all potentially doomed like Marilyn. We need to understand that there is inherent danger in this social Darwinism of cultural progress, as well as danger in Fukuyama's economic Darwinism. In *Specters of Marx* Derrida writes:

> For it must be cried out, at a time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelise in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realised itself as the ideal of human history: never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity. Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the 'end of ideologies' and the end of the great emancipatory discourses, let us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth." (106)

In *Blonde* Joyce Carol Oates uses the historical tragedy of Marilyn Monroe to alert us to the inherent danger of declaring this "end of ideologies." Marilyn's abuse, suffering, and exploitation at the hands of Hollywood executives becomes a "singular site of suffering" that can be used to represent the large-scale inequalities created in the name of progress.

Conclusion: Which way is the exit?

I will end where I began, with Fukuyama's "The End of History" essay. In the closing paragraph of the essay Fukuyama either appears to falter in his confidence with his predictions or he struggles with the idea of the end of history and the emergence of the universal homogenous state as sanguine, or both. At the very least he recognizes the potential for discontentedness and isolation manifest in a system of relentless economic growth, narcissistic individualism, and hedonistic consumption. All of the things that make us human—pain, love, imagination, creativity, community, recognition, bravery, anger, daring, hope—will be erased or rendered obsolete by technological progress and economic liberty. Fukuyama writes:

> The end of history will be a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history…Even though I recognize its inevitability, I have the most ambivalent feelings for the civilization that has been created…since 1945. (18)

This is a curious way to end an essay arguing for the ultimate triumph of the Western neoliberal state as "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution" (1). But Fukuyama seems to concede that once society is reduced to economic calculation and refining technical solutions a sort of cultural malaise will take hold. Jameson describes this cultural and economic synthesis as "not a one way street but a continuous reciprocal interaction and feedback loop" (xv) where the "more powerful the vision of some increasingly total system or logic…the more powerless the reader

comes to feel" (6). So, Fukuyama concedes that the triumph of late capitalism, which for him means the end of ideology, leads to boredom and ambivalence and for Jameson it leaves the individual agent feeling isolated and powerless. What I hope to have shown in the preceding pages is that *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, and *Blonde* were early reactions to the economic shift of the 1980s and can help us understand and resist some of the more alienating effects of an economy focused almost exclusively on individual achievement. And while the ideals of individual freedom, financial independence, and consumption are not necessarily dangerous in and of themselves, any mode of being has the potential to be destructive when taken to an extreme. The last line of Fukuyama's essay says "Perhaps this very prospect of centuries of boredom at the end of history will serve to get history started again" (18). Writing this at the close of 2020 I submit it has perhaps already started.

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