NIHILISM, SELF-DESTRUCTION AND THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF ESCAPE IN CONTEMPORARY TRANSGRESSIVE FICTIONS.

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of violence and transgression in mainstream media and society is often cited as undermining the radical impact of transgression or subversion within contemporary literature. This thesis, however, argues that a self-destructive ethos of resistance resonates in transgressive fiction, since 1990. Throughout this dissertation, I consider the significant works of four key contemporary writers, Bret Easton Ellis, Chuck Palahniuk, J.G. Ballard and Thomas Ligotti, to explore responses to cultural, political and philosophical discontent and readdress the value of transgression in what I loosely term fictions of self-destruction. Their fictions, I posit, explore acts and fantasies of corporeal, metaphysical and suicidal self-destruction as the key philosophical and affective issues at stake for the protagonists who seek to articulate a divergent response to, or escape from, existential and socio-political factors or concerns.

These authors (to varying extents) set a new benchmark for a philosophically controversial (or negativistic) mode of literary transgression. Moreover, the critical relevance of self-destruction as a subversive fantasy is now even more crucial, particularly when attempting to re-validate transgressive literatures as a satirical, artistic form that responds to palpable socio-political and existential concerns related to a nihilistic culture, the naturalisation of the logic of excess and consumption, and the supposed horror of existence. This thesis examines how these fictions engage with self-destructive tropes and ideas as a means of distraction or escape in a world devoid of feasible alternative. In this way, this study of entropic and philosophical self-destruction in contemporary literature does not necessarily propose any practical solutions or a new kind of radical politics applicable in the real world. It does, however, regard self-destructive and fatalistic transgressions as pertaining to an otherwise impossible fantasy of escape from or resistance to the intolerable postmodern and neoliberal worlds presented in these fictions. At stake in this thesis, then, is the establishment of self-destruction as a central concern within studies of literary transgression in contemporary fiction that follows the revalidation of increasingly controversial or denigrated concepts of literary transgression.

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In Chuck Palahniuk's short story 'Zombies' (2015), the narrator describes how the younger generation in his town are lobotomizing themselves to regress into an infantile, anti-social state to relieve themselves of a future 'lifetime of bullshit'.[1] The teenagers are pessimistic about the contemporary world that they live in and seek a way out. The brain-damaged state they desire is a self-destructive measure that negates and escapes the cultural-political pressures and expectations of the contemporary world. Witnessing the extent to which the threat of self-destruction and the pain of the 'loss' of a younger generation bonds society together, Trevor, the narrator, for a time resists. However, despite the increasing moral and ethical condemnation of the self-destructive youth revolt, by the end of the narrative Trevor seems to have accepted the spiteful and pessimistic logic of those he has observed and the story ends with the narrator at the precipice of the decision whether to follow his peers. As the narrative demonstrates, self-destruction is a contentious issue, at once a welcome and affirmative method of escape and a spiteful regression and indictment of a failed cultural and existential predicament.

Throughout this dissertation, I consider the significant works of four key contemporary writers, Bret Easton Ellis (*American Psycho,* 1991), Chuck Palahniuk (*Fight Club,* 1996 and *Haunted*, 2005), J. G. Ballard (*Super-Cannes*, 2000 and *Millennium People*, 2003) and Thomas Ligotti (*My Work is Not Yet Done*, 2002 and *Teatro Grottesco*, 2008) to explore the representation of cultural, political and philosophical discontent and the movement towards alternative values and

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[1] Chuck Palahniuk, 'Zombies' in *Make Something Up* (London: Vintage, 2015), p. 28.

transgression (evident in acts that cross, subvert or negate the acceptable/conceivable) in what I loosely term fictions of self-destruction.[2] The study of fictions of self-destruction is a response to thematic, metaphorical and literary representations of self-destruction within the narratives. Apposite to 'self-destructive fiction' that primarily alludes to a subversive play or experimentation within the form and stylistics of the text, fictions of self-destruction explore self-destruction as the key philosophical and affective issue at stake for the protagonists.[3] In particular, I am interested in the extent to which acts and fantasies of corporeal, metaphysical and suicidal self-destruction become a means for characters in the fictions of Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti to articulate a divergent response to, or escape from, existential and socio-political factors or concerns. These authors each demonstrate a formidable capacity to respond to contemporary socio-political and existential frustration. In so doing, they set a new benchmark for a philosophically controversial (or negativistic) mode of literary transgression predicated on self-destruction and creative destruction as an alternative to turn-of-the-century neoliberal capitalism and its insufferable demands on its typically despairing subject.

I have eluded to existential frustration as conceptual concern addressed by these writers, though some qualification of my use of the term, and its distinction from the philosophical existentialist movement, is necessary. At its most simplistic, existentialism is a strand of philosophy that interrogates what it is to be human within and apart from the world and 'the implications of life governed by human choice'.[4] For thinkers prominent in and loosely aligned to existentialism, existence (specifically that experienced by human beings, rather than 'life' generally) and the world we exist in is inherently meaningless. Existence is, for the majority of existentialists, a 'freedom' that is suffered as it causes great and inconsolable angst or anxiety. In short, if – following Nietzsche's depiction of nihilism, addressed later – a subject is completely free, then they are for Sartre, in a constant state of becoming. In this perpetual state of flux, the subject is never a fixed or coherent entity. If a subject is not a fixed something, then

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[2] Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage, 1991); Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (London: Vintage, 1996); Chuck Palahniuk, *Haunted* (London: Vintage, 2005); J. G. Ballard, *Super-Cannes* (London: Flamingo, 2000); J. G. Ballard, *Millennium People* (London: Flamingo, 2003); Thomas Ligotti, *My Work is Not Yet Done* (London: Virgin Books, 2009 [2002]); Thomas Ligotti, *Teatro Grottesco* (London: Virgin Books, 2008).
[3] Maria Beville, *Gothic-Postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity* (Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 2009); Kathryn Hume, *Aggressive Fictions* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); C. Namwali Serpell, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).
[4] Richard J. Lane, *Jean Baudrillard: Routledge Critical Thinkers* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 3.

reason suggests, for both existential (and pessimistic thinkers, whose position becomes more prominent throughout this thesis), that they are a nothing. Consequently, the subject who is riveted (Levinas) to life, is also 'condemned' by this freedom (Sartre).[5] That existence amounts to nothingness, then, is a metaphysical quandary that the existentialists sought to examine.

For Camus, existentialism is a revolt against this absurdity of existence that affirms the subject and life as a positive thing.[6] For Sartre, the existentialist position is a distinctly humanist one that affirms life amidst the chaos and attempts to imbue a sense of hope, optimism and agency in response to despair. However, within this thesis' readings of contemporary fiction and criticism, the positivist elements of existentialist philosophy are often disbanded as the term is used in a more opaque sense, which is less optimistic than the position taken by Camus and Sartre and their peers. Throughout this dissertation, I respond to the plight of jaded and self-destructive protagonists, who rather than persisting to push the metaphorical boulder up the hill, take more pragmatic and destructive steps towards an alternative or escape. One that, for many of the neo-Sisyphean figures of contemporary transgressive fictions, metaphorically speaking, involves letting go of the boulder and welcoming its destructive rollback. Though I do not apply a typically existentialist reading or model in my analysis of contemporary transgressive fictions, I do refer critically and rhetorically to the 'existential crisis', recalling a philosophical consensus that existence is a meaningless and alienating condition suffered by the subject wherein subjects experience an often horrific, painful or nauseating deterioration. Importantly, in my analysis, it is evident that the confrontation with the existential impasse motivates subjects to transgress, self-destruct or explore alternative – and less optimistic – routes of escape from the profound horror of existence (or existences, i.e. the lives of specific characters and subjects) which are considered meaningless (Ellis), gravely disappointing (Palahniuk), fundamentally absurd (Ballard) and malignantly useless (Ligotti).

In the contemporary world capitalist production, a palpable horror underlying the majority of fictions here studied, is associated with and represents 'the

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[5] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Existentialism Is a Humanism' (1946), *Marxists.org* (February 2005) <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm> [accessed 3 August 2019].
[6] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus,* trans. by Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 2005 [1942]).

consummating phase of nihilism'.[7] The response to the contemporary, for Nick Land, is identifiable in two distinct models: 'the speculative model of revolution [which] is one of 'taking over', [and] the pessimistic model [which] is one of escape'.[8] Both positions are explored throughout this thesis through the lens of self-destruction and nihilism which, as Ashley Woodward argues, 'is a philosophical framework for thinking through the problem of meaning in the contemporary world that otherwise stands in danger of remaining too amorphous to analyse'.[9] The literary and philosophical application of nihilism is articulated throughout this thesis as the fictions explore very different means of overcoming and usurping the felt ontological and existential (lack of) meaning and the socio-political reality of the neoliberal contemporary. When meaning and order are often considered to be lamentable and contestable paradigms in the contemporary world, nihilism provides a means through which to critique the status quo and articulate a desired response or release. In confirmation of this, I examine the revolutionary and politically motivated violent response to nihilism in Ballard and Palahniuk, and the pessimistic philosophy of destruction and self-undoing that is evident in the fiction of Ellis and Ligotti.

In all these cases, the artistic and literary fantasies of corporeal and psychological self-destruction, as a metaphorically potent and transgressive discourse, propose few practical or utilitarian real-world solutions. However, their study does recover the abstract potential of the negation of the political through extreme actions and demonstrates their significance in cultural and philosophical contexts. For Xavier Aldana Reyes, horror – particularly the aesthetic of corporeal or subjective disturbance – attacks the viewer/reader at somatic, emotional and cognitive levels thus highlighting the affective role of such images in artistic and philosophically challenging discourses.[10] As Steven Bruhm confirms, the sense of horror incited in specifically non-realist literary forms, 'afford […] us […] stimulations that distract us from the emptiness of our humanity'.[11] As confirmed in fictions of self-destruction, horror becomes a '*necessary*' means of representing unconscious or critically

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[7] Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 64.

[8] Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation,* p. 9.

[9] Ashley Woodward, *Nihilism in Postmodernity: Lyotard, Baudrillard, Vattimo* (Aurora: CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 2009), p. 1.

[10] Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Horror Film and Affect: Towards a Corporeal Model of Viewership* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 194.

[11] Steven Bruhm, 'Anchors Away!: Horror in the Age of Pessimism', *Horror Studies,* 8:1 (2017), 3–7 (p. 6).

underdeveloped feelings of personal and cultural anxiety, fear and even imaginative alternatives.

The critical relevance of self-destruction as a subversive and horrific fantasy is now even more crucial, particularly when attempting to re-validate transgressive literatures as a provocative and affective artistic form that responds to a series of socio-political and existential concerns. These concerns are predominantly related to the nihilistic and destructive cultural and economic practices engineered within postmodern neoliberal societies as everything (and everyone) becomes changed and reduced to its use-value within a ruthless system of exchange and consumption. It is the negative impact this has on subjective thought, individuality and creativity, (as well as a questioning of the meaninglessness felt by subjects/character) that becomes the cause of great ire and trauma in the modern transgressive text. As a result, the establishment of self-destruction as a central concern within contemporary literature prompts a dynamic interdisciplinary conversation regarding the philosophical, artistic and political implications of self-destruction and negation in contemporary literature.

In 1991, the emerging British publisher Serpent's Tail published *High Risk: An Anthology of Forbidden Writings*, which attempted to set the agenda for politically and philosophically subversive writing heading into the next millennium.[12] The satirical, subversive and angry voices of many prominent and cult literary figures featured in the book, such as Kathy Acker, William S. Burroughs, Mary Gaitskill and Dennis Cooper, for example, draw awareness towards a re-emergent transgressive literary scene that, I argue, takes off in the wider cultural imagination when fictions like *American Psycho* (1991) and *Fight Club* (1996) reach a mainstream audience. Satires, most recognisably, are highly critical texts that tend to take a moralistic position which suggests they see things as they "truly" are – ridiculous and terrible – and seek to explore 'a higher rationality' that, if it exists, does so outside of the certainties we adhere to.[13] They demonstrate a disdain towards and aversion of the rules and revel in undermining the efficacy of their targets (be they political institutions, the avatars of postmodern and consumer culture, or specific individuals). Robin Mookerjee argues that satires propose a negative philosophy that 'defines itself through its absence of

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[12] *High Risk: An Anthology of Forbidden Writings,* ed. by Ira Silverberg and Amy Scholder (London: Serpent's Tail, 1991).
[13] Robin Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition* (London: Palgrave, 2013), p. 44.

and hostility to theories and presuppositions'.[14] Interestingly, Graham Matthews, reading satire through a psychoanalytic lens, argues that 'satire produces a negative excess that results in enjoyment' and 'reduces individuals to their base instincts [while] simultaneously [enabling] a pleasure to be taken from the satisfaction of fundamental drives'.[15] While satire is one of the oldest and most well established modes of literary rebellion, its potential to incite a real change, reform or insurgency, is however for a number of critics, a source of contention – particularly in its contemporary iteration, which arguably lacks the same counter-cultural intensity or impetus.[16]

By making a mockery of institutions of power and contemporary culture through displays of vice and folly, satiric fictions may undermine such values – and indeed prove adept in doing so.[17] However, simply satirising an issue or concern too often fails to articulate an alternative, much less a resolution or escape. Notionally satire suggests we can laugh or cry at our given situation, though I am interested in the step beyond this – action or imagination as response. Conceptually, satire may, as Matthews asserts, 'enable' or set the conditions for a negativistic pleasures, but it is the act/activity that fulfils desire that is of pressing critical importance. It is for this reason that I focus on the transgressive, destructive or violent act or fantasy that follows a satiric reading of a situation. While I refer throughout this thesis to the satiric elements of a number of literary works, building on the critical positions of those here cited, mine is a position that ultimately remains sceptical of satire's capacity (or at least, the capacity of satire on its own) to fulfil any kind of traditionally counter-cultural intention.

Therefore, rather than focusing entirely on these texts' satiric intent, I focus more pressingly on transgression and destruction to combat, rebel or attempt to negotiate an escape or alternative. Contemporary satiric and transgressive fictions may not necessarily 'know better' and their worth as exponents of viable, radical and critical models, examined throughout this dissertation, is a contentious one. Nonetheless, a value is to be extracted in their transgressive experimenting and

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[14] Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction,* p. 16.
[15] Graham Matthews, *Ethics and Desire in the Wake of Postmodernism: Contemporary Satire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 22.
[16] J.C. Lee, 'Contemporary US-American Satire and Consumerism (Crews, Coupland, Palahniuk)', *CLC Web: Comparative Literature and Culture,* 14.4 (2012), <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss4/6> [accessed 3 August 2019].
[17] See: Matthews, *Ethics and Desire,* pp. 12–14.

speculating as towards new possibilities. Since the early 1990s, there has been a discernible shift in the focus and emphasis of satiric fictions towards transgression in order to combat frustration, cynicism and the failure of transgressive radicalism to incite meaningful change with self-destructive violence, philosophical negation and horror. It is precisely this ethos of resistance which I build on as I assess the continued validity of transgression, politically motivated anger, antipathy and self-destructive actions in contemporary fiction.

For many critics and authors, transgression in literature seems somewhat contrived and limited. In fiction, models of repetitious and gratuitous violence and depravity are often considered banal to the point that they barely register as shocking or abnormal. In this view, transgressive fiction and its most recognisable tropes (violence, sex and death) can be defanged insofar as they lose their critical function and coherence. Counter to these claims, my thesis develops readings of the politically and ontologically subversive intent of transgressive fictions of the late 20th and early 21st century. Each work of literature here examined, in some form, provocatively contests the existing status quo through a speculative literary engagement with increasingly undervalued or undermined concepts of violence, transgression and nihilism. In particular, through the depiction of rebellious individuals and larger outsider communities/societies engaged in self-destructive activities (whether as ontologically challenging fantasies, or the eruption of orchestrated, politically motivated violence), a subversive dimension of literary transgression is explored culminating in often troubling and provocative conclusions.

My focus on contentious and self-destructive literary scenes and fantasies reveals that fictions of self-destruction outline an important transvaluation of the predominant social, moral and political values in their playing to the radical and negative desires of their protagonists, rather than the optimistic or the affirmative. Throughout this dissertation, I examine fictional portrayals of monstrous outsiders driven to self-destruction in order to reify the importance of literary and philosophical acts and violent fantasies in the contemporary cultural context. The delineation of the 'contemporary' as beginning in the early 1990s stems from an assessment following the likes of influential thinkers such as Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard and more recently Franco Berardi and Mark Fisher, who argue that the 70s and 80s ushered in the (political, cultural, economic) conditions for the 'slow cancellation of the future'

(Berardi) that dominates through the 90s into the 21st century.[18] By this, they are speaking against a sense of malaise, the deflation of radical impetus and the cultural logic that dispels any conception of an existence after capitalism. In the wake of the 1980s, for these thinkers, the contemporary is defined by globalized neoliberal capitalism's positioning of itself as the only game in town. It is a period wherein capitalism – allied with a specific postmodern cultural environment – is ubiquitous and inescapable having been ushered in, primarily, by the pro-corporate, pro-business, conservative socio-economic policy in western capitalist nations throughout the 1980s, and the subsequent failure or collapse of the Left to articulate a viable counter position. Indeed, it was the later period of the 1980s, culminating in 1991, that the Soviet Union – the only viable alternative to capitalist hegemony – collapsed prompting the American political theorist, economist and neoliberal apologist, Francis Fukuyama to proclaim 'the end of history' as free-market capitalism asserts itself as the natural end-point of socio-cultural evolution.[19] This late-1980s postmodern, neoliberal scene, which prefaces the historical period and philosophical/cultural impasse to which my study addresses, is, to follow Baudrillard, the period 'after the orgy' of modernity wherein there was a tangible counter-cultural potential for liberation, rebellion and optimism.[20] What follows, however, is a period in which there are arguably no more limits to transgress, where all that can be done is to simulate the orgy, 'to pretend to carry on in the same direction, accelerating, but in reality we [within western societies] are accelerating in a void'.[21]

Following the failure to articulate a viable anti-capitalist alternative (be it culturally, socially and politically), by the 1990s there is an inescapable sense that everything – in fiction, as in life – emerges directly or indirectly as a symptom or response to the discontent engendered by this new epoch. This, coupled with the perceived ubiquity of cultural postmodernism and the disillusionment and cynicism (or the 'melancholic, self-pitying reaction to the apparent disintegration of political reality'[22]) generated, points towards a clearly definably contemporary period in which political, cultural and economic concerns are entwined with an existential discontent

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18 Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *After the Future',* ed. by Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011), p. 13.
19 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 2012 [1992]).
20 Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena,* trans. by James Benedict (London: Verso, 1993), p. 3.
21 Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil,* p. 3.
22 Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 7.

and desire for an alternative and/or escape that is conventionally impossible. The literary responses to this impasse throughout the transgressive and satirical fictions of the 1980s and early 1990s are explored in numerous critical studies including James Annesley's *Blank Fictions* (1998)*,* Graham Matthews' *Ethics and Desire in the Wake of Postmodernism* (2012)*,* Robin Mookerjee's *Transgressive Fiction* (2013) and Durand and Mandel's *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme* (2008)*.* Moreover, alongside a growing trend towards 'blank' or 'aggressive' fictions, transgression and satire, which instigate a critical readdress of uses and limits of violence, excess, sex and death there has in recent decades been a pronounced critical and philosophical institutionalization of the tropes and ethics of Gothic, horror and self-destruction, as politically and artistically potent and valid modes of discourse.

Symptomatic of and engaging with each of these concerns, the outset of the 1990s saw the publication of Bret Easton Ellis's controversial novel *American Psycho* (1991)*.* This novel serves as a threshold for the contemporary, wherein all the seething concerns hitherto identified are aligned as Ellis explicitly engages with this cultural impasse and foregrounds a re-evaluation of affective representations of violence, the (im)possibility of escape and the role of self-destruction, that occupy countless authors, critics and thinkers throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s. Resultantly, I focus on fictions published within a period of around 15 years beginning in 1991 and extending in to the first decade of the present millennium because these decades have been the hardest hit by the legacy of late-capitalist and neoliberal economic structures and postmodern culture identified in the above. As this dissertation acknowledges, many fictions produced within these decades are overtly engaged with contesting the nihilistic and apocalyptic worlds engendered by late-capitalism and neoliberalism and its effects on the contemporary imagination. In *Fictions of Globalization* (2006)*,* James Annesley questions 'the extent to which it is possible for a product of a market society to develop a critical perspective upon that same society in terms that are neither hopelessly co-opted nor dangerously complicit'.[23] This concern often underlies this thesis, as I read literary responses to the damaging 'ideals' or 'logic' promoted by cultural postmodernism, neoliberalism and as a product of the globalized post-politics (or the insurmountable neoliberal-capitalist ideological consensus) as affects subjects. Beginning, then, with *American Psycho,* published in 1991 and effectively the first

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[23] James Annesley, *Fictions of Globalization* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 11.

novel to treat the 1980s critically and propose a form of literary dissent through violent and self-destructive tropes, this thesis critically analyses the cultural transition between the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as is presented in transgressive fiction. It is a transition that, importantly undermines the optimistic narrative of neoliberal-postmodernism, readdresses literary transgression as a valid critical perspective and culminates in the advent of a strange and philosophically intriguing altruistic self-destruction.

To clarify, it is not my intention to rehearse the findings of a host of influential readings of transgressive fiction, but to propose an original framework for reading contemporary fiction centred on self-destruction as the most effective means of responding to existential and material concerns. These concerns are particularly related to the use/abuse of the subject and the ineffectiveness of fulfilling or rebellious action within the neoliberal era. In this thesis, I evade reading Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti as nihilists or satirists who, through violence, sex and death oppose everything and propose nothing of value, nor do I attempt to emphasise a moral value in these texts amidst an amoral world.[24] Similarly, I avoid replicating established 'blank' readings of the cynicism, consumption and deviance found in increasingly mainstream literatures, as such readings draw too heavily on the material conditions of consumerist societies, undervaluing the multi-faceted philosophical and existential importance of self-destructive transgression as an oppositional stance.[25] Lastly, I take a more pessimistic critical view centred on the negation of values as an alternative, as opposed to identifying transgression as a means to reconnect with inherent values or psychoanalytic notions of desire, enjoyment and the affirmation of the subject. In so doing, I demonstrate how transgressive literary episodes of ontological and entropic horror and self-destruction undermine the prescribed basis of rational order and behaviour in creative response to the degenerative experience of existing in the contemporary world.

As Graham Matthews pointedly demonstrates:

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[24] Robin Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
[25] James Annesley, *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel* (London: Pluto Press, 1998); Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney, *Shopping in Space: Essays on American 'Blank Generation' Fiction* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1992); James Annesley, *Fictions of Globalization: Consumption, the Market and the Contemporary American Novel* (London: Continuum, 2006).

> The unprecedented expansion of postmodern aesthetics into all aspects of contemporary life has led to a cultural hegemony that has in turn hindered the Marxist political rhetoric of emancipation and revolution. In addition to this, the radical thought discussed in the academy has now become increasingly divorced from real world praxis, thereby offering itself as an ideological support for the systems of global capitalism.[26]

This thesis acknowledges the pressing difficulties in the attempt to challenge or critically undermine neoliberal capitalism and cultural postmodernism. In an era when critical dialogue seemingly lacks a cutting edge and struggles to articulate a valid or practical revolutionary model, my readings embrace the break from real-world praxis and engage with fictional fantasies of escape. Therefore, I do not propose to uncover a framework for practical alternatives to systems of global capitalism in these literatures. Instead, I identify how a number of fictions creatively respond to the metaphysical and existential condition of the inflicted subjects, bodies and communities under attack by these systems.

The aims of this thesis are as follows. Firstly, to explore the status and effectiveness of literary transgression, violence and excess as a counter-narrative to contemporary discontent. Second, carry out detailed analysis of the literary application of nihilism and self-destruction to demonstrate its growing critical importance in the literature of Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti. Thirdly, to extend contemporary and postmodern critical debates regarding the contested value of transgression by reframing transgressive paradigms and discourses of literary violence, sadism, eroticism and subversion within the context of self-destruction. Finally, my intention is to establish how literary fantasies of self-destruction contest, validate or extend theoretical and philosophical approaches towards the viability of individual and societal alternatives to hegemony, particularly in the context of the neoliberal present. In fulfilment of these aims, I draw on numerous critical works in the fields of poststructuralism, ontological negativity, existentialism and horror. I thereby seek to highlight the continued importance of transgressive fictions by establishing self-destruction as a coherent mode of philosophical and aesthetic contravention, assessing how these authors challenge the critical rhetoric that suggests transgression is unable to respond effectively to a 'post-political', cultural

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[26] Graham Matthews, *Ethics and Desire in the Wake of Postmodernism* (London: Continuum, 2012), p. 1; Naomi Mandel, *Disappear Here: Violence after Generation X* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2015).

postmodernist era. To reiterate, at stake throughout this thesis, then, is the establishment of self-destruction as a central concern within literary studies as means of exploring the viability of individual and societal alternatives to neoliberal hegemony and postmodernism as 'the dominant cultural force' in the last three decades.[27]

Each of the fictions herein studied explicitly respond to a crisis of subjectivity related to a nightmarish and hegemonic state of neoliberal post-politics and capitalist realism. For David Harvey, neoliberalism emerges as '[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'.[28] It has since mutated into a mode of control that pervades thought at all levels and is deeply incorporated within the discourse of modern culture and even our very subjective, existential make-up.[29] Byung-Chul Han describes this current cultural predicament as a crisis in which 'freedom itself', the mantra on which neoliberalism is built, brings forth only 'compulsion and constraint' which lead to the further entrapment of the subject within the alienating and denigrating framework of postmodern and neoliberal society.[30] Neoliberalism, in this sense, 'represents a highly efficient, indeed an intelligent, system for exploiting freedom […] affirmation' and even desire or expressive forms of individual liberty for the benefit of economic exchange.[31] Not only does this mode of capitalism destroy 'prior institutional frameworks and powers', it also finds new and creative ways of destroying entire 'ways of life and thought'.[32] As a diagnostic framework for reading the current socio-political and cultural nightmare, the notion of capitalist realism identifies the symptoms and effects of the increasingly hegemonic and persuasive state of neoliberal capitalism since the 1990s.[33] As Mark Fisher describes it, capitalist realism is, both, the belief 'that there's no alternative to capitalism', and it describes the 'attitude of resignation and fatalism in the face of this – a sense that all we can do is accommodate ourselves […] and limit our hopes to containing its worst excesses'.[34] Fundamentally, capitalist realism critiques neoliberal

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[27] Matthews, *Ethics and Desire,* p. 1.

[28] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 2.

[29] Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, p. 3.

[30] Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power,* trans. by Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2017), p. 1.

[31] Han, *Psychopolitics*, pp. 1, 3; Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *The Soul At Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009), p. 208.

[32] Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, p. 3.

[33] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Hants: Zero Books, 2009).

[34] Mark Fisher, 'Capitalist Realism: Is There Still No Alternative? by Mark Fisher', *Strike Magazine,* 1 (2012) <https://strikemag.org/capitalist-realism-is-there-still-no-alternative> [accessed 12 May 2018].

capitalism's real-world and metaphysical application, as it supplants natural or alternative values and desires with a staged-fantasy of capitalist exchange. Moreover, it describes a pervasive atmosphere that is found in all areas of cultural, social and political life and corresponds with the intellectual and institutional suppression and devaluation of any form or concept of alternative to capitalism (be it rational, violent, intellectual, transgressive or otherwise).

Both capitalism and neoliberalism are here considered nihilistic and destructive for the way they negatively affect social relations, and how they corrode independent subjective thought. In evidence of this, there has been a marked rise in the number of recent titles by the likes of Slavoj Žižek, David Harvey, Mark Fisher and Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, for example, that denounce neoliberal capitalism for its negative impact on contemporary western culture and society and make overtures towards radical possibilities and solutions.[35] Similarly, for many contemporary critics loosely aligned with contemporary accelerationism, the crises posed by capitalism can be overcome by a hastening of neoliberal abstraction or retooling of technological advancements. The likes of Nick Land, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, Benjamin Noys and Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, for example, to differing degrees, explore the extent that the headfirst rush towards acceleration practically and speculatively present radical opportunities for social politics, and pose affirmative, existential alternatives premised on the re-engagement with darker aspects of subjective desire.[36] Despite the increasing demand for such criticism and alternatives, the political and social realities and events in the wake of the 2008 financial crash have demonstrated that this supposed socio-political crisis has not yet reached its terminal stage. Or alternatively, that this terminus has been met with apathy and a lack of will to instigate

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[35] Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008); Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, *Revised and Updated Edition* (London: Verso, 2011); Slavoj Žižek, *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2015); David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2011); David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2014); Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Hants: Zero Books, 2014); Mark Fisher, 'Acid Communism (Unfinished Introduction)' (2016) in Mark Fisher, *K-Punk: The collected and unpublished writings of Mark Fisher from 2004–2016,* ed. by Darren Ambrose (London: Repeater, 2018); Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility* (London: Verso, 2017); Berardi, *The Soul at Work*; Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (London: Verso, 2015a).

[36] Land, *The Thirst For Annihilation*; Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007,* ed. Robin Mackay & Ray Brassier (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2011); Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015); *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader,* ed. by Armen Avanessian and Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014); Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); Benjamin Noys, *Malign Velocities* (Hants: Zero Books, 2014).

the changes necessary to bring either a socio-political revolution akin to those proposed in novels like *Fight Club* or *Millennium People,* or a widely applicable ontological negation of real-world praxis, as alluded to or sought in fictions like *American Psycho* or *My Work is Not Yet Done*. Even when it appears to be in its death throes, neoliberal institutions and political and cultural apparatuses work to sustain the status quo and have thus far remained resilient opponents for those who find them problematic.

The attempt to diagnose or propose alternative visions of the future in sociological or economic contexts has occupied countless critics and thinkers on the left. However, the lack of any real-world change or praxis means that, to some extent they have fallen short in their aims. It is significant that contemporary transgressive fictions, emergent from these socio-political and economic situations and concerns, and fraught with entropic violence, misdemeanour, nihilism and negativism, have in recent decades been at the forefront of an imaginative and critical takedown of these institutions and frameworks. Conversely, I argue the best examples of alternative or subversive visions emerge in contemporary transgressive literatures. Particularly, in a non-realist variation of the transgressive novel that is generally more pessimistic in its appeal to self-destruction as an alternative/escape from the bleak existential predicament befalling the subject in the contemporary neoliberal world. This concern is addressed in the fiction of Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti as a nihilistic and conspiratorial cultural and economic force (beneath the façade of the societies they depict) is exposed. In their fictions, affirmative or optimistic responses are often frustrated as deviancy and transgression are revealed as symptoms of, rather than the solution to, this deadlock. I propose that the literary engagement with self-destruction undermines the desire for an affirmative resolution *within* the capitalist-realist contemporary scenario and crucially reflects an imaginative alternative in which the headlong rush into destruction becomes 'an intimate and on-going possibility' of literary and radical deviancy.[37] The curative or radical aspect in these texts is not the rollout of a viable, wider societal change, but a rebellion that strikes at the very core of subjective being. Moreover, through the consumptive violence of Ellis's *American Psycho,* the engagement with death in Palahniuk's *Haunted,* the destructive nihilism of Ballard's *Millennium People,* and the view of suicide taken in Ligotti's works, these

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[37] Noys, *Malign Velocities*, p. 92.

fictions turn to self-destruction as a spiteful game-changing fantasy that undermines a contemporary cultural environment that previously denied the 'possibility of changing the game'.[38]

Some might say that if self-destruction demonstrates an overcoming of oneself and reconnection with some form of the *real* or an inherent sense of lost desire, then it is an optimistic gesture that reaffirms the subject. Yet, closer readings of the fictions here presented demonstrate a more ambivalent intention. Fundamental to my theoretical position is the contention that there is a distinct tension in contemporary transgressive literatures between radical action that is affirmative or optimistic and that which is pessimistic and fatalistic (i.e. that which does not reaffirm the subject but seeks to vacate it). In response, I examine actions and fantasies of literary characters who seek to negate a problematic and stifling cultural/hegemonic situation and who desire to escape from existence in one way or another. This line of argument is not dissimilar to Benjamin Noys's advocating of the need to resist the affirmationist trend of continental theory to redeem the negative as an idealistic gesture which ultimately 'defangs' its radical potential. In Noys's view, resistance centred on 'the ironic affirmation of human finitude' undermines threatening negative and destructive impulses and ultimately serves to bring negativity into alignment with the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism.[39] Speculatively speaking, what is required is an emotive (even horrific) encounter with negativity that resists and transgresses the re-affirmation of the status quo, namely, a philosophically challenging negation or vacation of the self as an alternative to existential and socio-cultural discontent, similar to Noy's demand for a reading of 'negativity as a condition of rethinking agency' so as to escape the 'deadening constraints of the present'.[40] Increasingly responsive to a growing literary and philosophical scepticism towards affirmative responses to existential and political nihilism, frustration and discontent, I demonstrate how Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti (and by extension writers who share in their literary custom and concern) undermine cultural and political limits through ever-more pessimistic and fictional variations of self-destruction.

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[38] Bülent Diken, 'Religious Antinomies of Post-Politics' in *The Post-Political and its Discontents: Spaces of Depoliticisation, Spectres of Radical Politics,* ed. by Japhy Wilson and Erik Swyngedouw (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 126–145 (p. 127).
[39] Noys, *Persistence,* p. xi.
[40] Noys, *Persistence*, pp. 13; 14.

Throughout this thesis, self-destruction is defined as a radical and self-directed disturbance of state (or sense) of being, however I maintain a significant distinction between self-destruction and suicide. Self-destruction in the fictions I analyse responds to the socio-political and existential deadlocks that trouble their protagonists. However, like Ligotti, David Benatar and E. M. Cioran, I posit that suicide is scant resolution to the most fundamental crises of the human condition. Cioran eruditely argued that 'only optimists commit suicide, the optimists who can no longer be […] optimists. The others, having no reason to live, why should they have any to die?'[41] Benatar's rationale for his concurrent position is that individual suicide presents no valid solution to the wider existential problems that plague humanity, so ultimately lacks any meaningful sense of purpose or resolution.[42] Of course, there are caveats. Suicide is not an effective means to every end, but for many in intolerable situations it can be the best available response. This is precisely what Jean Améry suggested when he argued, while death as the negation of life is invariably senseless, the decision to act in this way 'is not only made in freedom but also brings real freedom to us'.[43] My readings of self-destruction within contemporary fiction often confront suicide as a possibility of escape and the negation of existential suffering and cultural-political subservience. I maintain that the symbolic or imaginative gesture or fantasy of suicide maintains a radical subversive potential. However, I am careful to navigate the tense line between imagining suicide in literary and philosophical debate and advocating it in reality.

To briefly recap, through a critical engagement with the disconcerting literary presentation of capitalist realism and existential horror, in the fiction of Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti, I read self-destruction as both alternative and escape. For Emmanuel Levinas, 'escape is the need to get out of oneself, […] *to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I is oneself*'.[44] That is, escape is a breaking free from the fixed and stable person (oneself) they (I) present themselves as. To escape, within the realm of contemporary transgressive fiction, is to seek a self-destructive/self-abandoning fantasy to break the somnolence and suffering of neoliberal existence. It is thus my view that critical literary enquiry must

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[41] Simon Critchley, *Notes on Suicide* (London: Fitzcarraldo Press, 2015), p. 72.
[42] David Benatar, *The Human Predicament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 163.
[43] Critchley, *Suicide*, p. 69.
[44] Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape: De l'évasion,* trans. by Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003 [1982]), p. 55. Italics in original.

not be repulsed by fantasies of self-destruction and nihilism, no matter the aesthetic form they take. As Ligotti suggests in his non-fiction study of horror and pessimism, to engage with horror is to evade the terrifying reprisals of affirmation and to 'indulge in cruel pleasures against ourselves and our pretensions'.[45] Only by doing so can the subversive potential within literary fantasies of self-annihilation reveal necessary, existential and politically divergent possibilities. The reading of fictions of self-destruction move literary debate progressively beyond much considered and repellent aesthetic transgressive paradigms and towards a rethinking of the use-value of ruinous fantasies as active forms of abstract oppositional behaviours. As such, I reject the notion that fictions aligned with the radical left must propose practical solutions or a new kind of rational politics in themselves, else they are of no critical importance or value. Instead, I argue the importance and critical necessity of an imaginative politics premised on the abstract negation of the acceptable as a way of rejecting the status quo. In this regard, fictions of self-destruction serve a critically reinvigorating purpose that revalidates negativity and self-destruction as politically and ontologically pertinent radical artistic devices.

The Persistence of Nihilism and Transgression as Radical Artistic Devices

If the cultural/political environment of contemporary Anglo-American fictions is one characterised by pessimism and a desire to break from the traumatic feeling of profound horror or malaise, then there are no better theoretical and artistic paradigms to explore these possibilities than transgression and nihilism. In the following pages, beginning with nihilism and then transgression, I briefly validate both as critical frames pertinent to readings of radicalism and self-destruction in contemporary fiction and qualify some of the theoretical directions I take in this thesis.

Nihilism is shaped by discontent and within modern critical debates there has been a return to and re-establishment of nihilism as a valid critical tool to counteract the ethical, moral and political complacencies of postmodernity.[46] Nihilism is the crisis

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[45] Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy against the Human Race* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2010), pp. 166–7.
[46] See, for example: *Nihilism Now! Monsters of Energy*, ed. by Keith Ansell Pearson and Diane Morgan (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000).

of ontological and material discontent that results in the rupture of a subject's belief in given values of meaning and order. For Fredrich Nietzsche, influenced by the pessimistic works of Arthur Schopenhauer, nihilism emerges out of metaphysical crisis and the disillusionment with theological and philosophical discourses which deny the fundamental 'meaninglessness of suffering' that plagues humankind.[47] For Nietzsche, nihilism is the residual and degenerative crisis caused by a wider cultural/societal lack of motivation or will towards the creation of antithetical values and possibilities that is to be overcome through the expression (and affirmation) of one's own will and the deconstruction of the notion of the limit. In light of this, in his informative preface to *Anti-Nietzsche* (2011), Malcolm Bull suggests that Nietzsche's nihilism remains potent and provocative in the modern imaginary as a philosophy of the limit, or a 'limit-philosophy'.[48] While Nietzschean nihilism is a contested critical discourse, it functions as a means to move beyond moral and ontological scepticism towards an understanding of its failure(s), and suggests that sense can in fact be found or made in response to the 'nonsense' of the world. In recent years, critics like Eugene Thacker, Ray Brassier and Quentin Meillassoux, for example, have foregrounded nihilism's importance and its links to subjective, annihilating and horrific fantasies at the heart of the human experience.[49] Marking a speculative turn towards metaphysical realism, they often posit that nihilism marks a creative opportunity to fundamentally transgress the 'correlative' synthesis between thought and reality and examine the feasibility of nihilistic – and indeed weird or horrific – fantasies as self-destructive prerogatives.[50] I consider this theme throughout Chapter Four as my discussions of the philosophical and nihilistic underpinnings of Ligotti's fiction become increasingly divorced from a real-world praxis as the author engages with a literary and philosophical transgression of post-enlightenment values and anthropocentricism.

Throughout this thesis, it is not an 'overcoming' of nihilism through affirmation that I view as significant in these fictions. This is because characters continually struggle to escape their terrifying predicaments and those resembling the Nietzschean 'overman', who *wills* an affirmative change in the world, routinely become problematic

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[47] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887), *The Nietzsche Reader,* ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 435.

[48] Malcolm Bull, *Anti-Nietzsche* (London: Verso, 2014), preface.

[49] Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency,* trans. by Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008); Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Eugene Thacker, *After Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[50] Brassier. *Nihil Unbound,* p. xi.

figures. Instead, I argue that these fictions respond to nihilism as a moral and ethical crisis that demands a self-destructive, rather than positivist, response. The Nietzschean '*will to destruction*' is thus indicative of a deeper and more inherent instinct, namely, 'the instinct of self-destruction, of the *will to nothingness*'.[51] Despite the oft cited contention that a will to nothingness is still a will (a positive, actioning force), the literary engagement with nihilism less resembles a constant process of rejection and 'becoming-more', than a negativist 'un-becoming' that negates and changes the material and existential experience of life for the characters of Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti's fictions.

While this speculative and pessimistic nihilistic tone reveals itself to varying degrees in the works of Ellis, Palahniuk and Ballard, it is fair to state that nihilism is most evident today in contemporary transgressive literatures in their cynical responses to the material and metaphysical disconnect between 'fictitious' capital and the suffering and alienated subject living under the duress of neoliberal and postmodern culture. In this context, nihilism is a significant means of diagnosing the inherent instinctive will to pursue forms of useless and self-defeating activity. Through a combination of revolutionary impotence and a perverse enjoyment of modalities of violence, suffering and self-destruction, nihilism in the fictions of Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti often appear as a spiteful form of resistance that aims to beat a fundamentally meaningless neoliberal society at its own game. Somewhat controversially, nihilism is increasingly presented in their works as a logical achievement. This notion is supported by a growing philosophical and literary consensus that calls for a new, resistant or contrary ethical approach, borne of nihilism.[52]

Philosophy is said to begin with a horrific realisation, namely that 'existence is something both horrible and absurd' that must be overcome.[53] This notion resonates within many contemporary transgressive fictions as the artistic take on the experience of contemporary life is formed by discontent and a grim awareness of the incredulity of meaning itself. Stemming from a failure of political and moral discourse to articulate

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[51] Friedrich Nietzsche, *European Nihilism* (1887) in Pearson and Large, eds., *The Nietzsche Reader*, p. 388.
[52] Simon Critchley, *Very Little… Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 10. See also: Simon Critchley. *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007); Eugene Thacker, *Infinite Resignation* (London: Repeater, 2018).
[53] Keith Ansell Pearson, *How To Read Nietzsche* (London: Granta, 2005), p. 10.

an alternative, for Simon Critchley, nihilism is an achievement of thinking which confirms that the philosophical idealism of modernity no longer corresponds to contemporary existential and socio-political realities, wherein 'progressive degradation' of social relations through an increased de-subjectification and 'capitalization' rapidly occurs.[54] Nihilism, then, in this modern interpretation is characterised in its opposition to intellectual truisms, socio-political apparatuses and capitalist politics. Nihilism is undoubtedly highly problematic in its real-world application (as demonstrated particularly in Ellis's and Ballard's fictions) as dichotomous forms of passive and active nihilism converge in discordant and cynical acts of disengagement or in violent acts of wanton destruction that only reinforce the nihilistic world-view.[55] However, as an imaginative thought-experiment, nihilism (in its popular, contemporary iteration as a mode of extreme opposition and destructive, anti-life sentiment) is often lauded as a means through which to confront and expose a baseless, degenerative capitalism imbued in the material and metaphysical structure of everyday life.

Responding to the way that society is shaped by the antagonism between the passive nihilism of neoliberal/globalised societies and the radical, destructive nihilism of terrorism, Bülent Diken calls for a 'spiteful' (anti)nihilism that runs counter to social and political values, as the only viable 'political' alternative.[56] As Diken's anti-nihilism presents the speculative case for an ethics of self-destruction, Berardi presents a warning against self-destructive forms of nihilism (in reality), but also a philosophical defence of the abstract or metaphysical impact of spiteful nihilism.[57] As subjectivity and desire are central to the functional capacity of the economy, the extent to which capitalism manipulates and colonises these essential concepts, for Berardi, becomes the cause of psychopathological behaviours, transgression and wider cultural despair. Opposed to hermeneutic nihilism, in which moral truth is revealed through the destruction of the understanding of the world, in the contemporary world of capitalist absolutism, Berardi argues that 'annihilating nihilism' takes over as a result of capital's

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[54] Critchley, *Very Little…*, p. 10.
[55] Critchley, *Very Little…*, p. 12.
[56] Ali Riza Taskale, 'Margins of Nihilism/Nihilisms of the Margin: Social Theory Facing Nihilism', *Theory, Culture and Society,* 28:2 (2011), 152–161 (pp. 154–5); Bülent Diken, *Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 2009a), pp. 68; 33. See also: Žižek, *Violence.*
[57] In *Soul At Work* (2009) Berardi presents a systematic critique of contemporary capitalism as an annihilating, psychosomatic, as well as economic, construct and in *Heroes* (2015), he attacks the 'establishment of a kingdom of nihilism and the suicidal drive that is permeating in contemporary culture'. Berardi, *Heroes,* pp. 2; 1–3.

denigration of the world.[58] Like Critchley and Diken, Berardi is sceptical of the possibility of overcoming or reconfiguring our so-called age of nihilism. Instead, he describes the implications and 'metaphorical density' of self-destructive modes of alterity presented in destructive nihilism, suicide and mass murder which break down the distinction between spectacle and real life.[59] In this view, while mass murder and suicide are symptoms of the 'agony of capitalism and the dismantling of social civilization', the questions raised by the extent to which people are enticed or driven 'to find a suicidal exit from their present hell' is demonstrative of the significance of rethinking nihilism.[60]

Nihilism (be it the nihilism inherent in contemporary society, or the nihilism of a subject's response to disillusionment or anger) aggravates the 'instinct of self-destruction'.[61] In so doing, nihilism raises important concerns pertaining to fantasies of extreme and ironic escapism and the extent to which people are driven toward self-destructive alternatives to their present hell. The readings of self-destructive nihilism in the literatures of Ballard, Ligotti, Ellis and Palahniuk prove of critical importance here, as these authors articulate, respond to and explore the possibility of transgression or escape in worlds devoid of meaning, as I shall briefly outline. In Ellis's *American Psycho,* a literary revision of passive nihilism is explored in the narrative's satirical and melancholic reaction to the disintegration of reality and subjectivity against the gains of capitalist realism. Throughout Ellis's novel nihilism is apparent as grotesque violence obscures, undermines and alienates the transgressing subject, as opposed to affirming or alleviating him. Nihilistic acts of destruction in *American Psycho* ultimately appear as wholly dejected and futile gestures, as they neither affirm, nor alleviate his angst, but instead appear to have been subsumed into the fluxes and operations of capitalism and postmodernity. In Palahniuk's fiction however, violence and nihilism are characterised by a discernible sense of hope. Throughout *Fight Club* and *Haunted,* existential despair and the subsequent wanton destruction of persons and property are sought as a radical (and somewhat spiteful) means of elevating or reaffirming the subject that affords a sense of purpose and undermines fundamental socio-political and cultural prerequisites and values.

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[58] Berardi, *Heroes*, p. 88.
[59] Berardi, *Heroes*, p. 1.
[60] Berardi, *Heroes*, pp. 2–3.
[61] Friedrich Nietzsche, 'European Nihilism', in Pearson and Large, eds., *The Nietzsche Reader,* p. 388.

In the fiction of Ellis and Palahniuk, nihilism articulates and responds to what many would consider as the contemptible condition of the present age, wherein there exists a complacency of radical and creative thought and a prominent cultural and subjective desire for fantasies of destruction. The re-engagement with nihilism, for some authors, marks a starting point for greater ethical and political alternatives, counter to political/cultural disappointment and frustration. This is the case in Ballard's *Cocaine Nights* and *Super-Cannes,* whereby given fictional communities reject the passive nihilism of middle-class inertia that had led to communal estrangement and decline and engage in active-nihilistic activities to reinvigorate themselves within their otherwise blank and unfulfilling lives. In *Millennium People,* Ballard's narrative charts the (d)evolution from transgression to revolution to nihilism, as characters rebel against cultural and societal apathy and alienation. In so doing, Ballard's novels play on the disturbing appeal of nihilistic fantasies of meaningless violence and revolution that resonate with a contemporary culture that demands a release from the seemingly inescapable exchange-value machine of neoliberal capitalism. Like Palahniuk's Mr. Whittier (*Haunted*) and Tyler Durden (*Fight Club*), Ballard's anti-heroes like Gould (*Millennium People*) and Penrose (*Super-Cannes*) preach a version of active nihilism and destruction opposed to rational notions of morality and political correctness. In their presentation of the response to existential malaise, the authors critique and satirize a popularised version of nihilism that fetishizes entropic and gratuitous destruction within a nihilistic and superficial world.

Perhaps even more contentiously, critics like Eugene Thacker and Ray Brassier consider nihilism as a privileged condition that the subject must embrace in order to challenge themselves and the intellectual or moral parameters against which the human subject defines itself. As Brassier states, 'the disenchantment of the world deserves to be celebrated as an achievement of intellectual maturity, not bewailed as a debilitating impoverishment'.[62] From a position of metaphysical nihilism that rejects the notion that a subject can even understand, much less control or fix the world, Thomas Ligotti's short fictions express the view that existence at its basest level is utterly meaningless and synonymous with suffering. In so doing, his fictions take a much more pessimistic approach to nihilism than the previous authors, as his characters all fall victim to a total and horrific collapse of logic and reason that 'annuls

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[62] Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, p. xi.

the world' and negates the need to reaffirm the subject within increasingly problematic cultural and political spheres.[63] In *Teatro Grottesco* (2008) and *My Work is Not Yet Done* (2002)*,* protagonists repeatedly comprehend the absurdity of the human existential predicament as existence is presented as a suffocating and malignantly purposeless event. Seeing no meaningful use or value in their lives nor any viable or positive outlet, Ligotti's protagonists resort to acts of nihilistic transgression and death in their attempt to stymie or better manage their suffering. Rather than a means towards affirmation, the worlds and transgressions he depicts often lead only to an acceptance or re-tooling of suffering in a world devoid of practical escape or alternative.

More so than in Ellis, Palahniuk and Ballard, Ligotti's speculative, literary and philosophical response to the contemporary neoliberal/corporate world examines the metaphysical implications of the self-destructive descent into the abyss of horror and alterity. For Thacker, genre horror provides scope through which to understand the world's alterity and for Ethan Stoneman and Joseph Packer, the philosophically-contentious denial of existential significance in literary horror is at 'odds with the affirmative function of rhetoric to preserve a world of meaning'.[64] The fictions here analysed prominently feature horrific and pessimistic concerns in their adoption of 'a less straightforwardly rational mode of argument'.[65] In so doing, they incite feelings of terror, disgust or challenge conventional understandings of the world through their representations of monstrosity, violence and self-destruction. In Ligotti's fictions this self-destructive unchaining of oneself from moral, 'practical' and life-affirming absolutes allows for an imaginative engagement with horror that escapes the morose existential predicament befalling the literary subject.

The appeal of philosophical nihilism within non-realist transgressive fictions is the result of these various novels' capacity to expose and negate both, socio-political and existential concerns through violence and self-destruction. Nihilism may not 'serve any productive purpose or offer positive rational knowledge', but it does present a transgression of rationality and order that 'affirms the play—and excess—of Being'

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[63] Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, p. xi.
[64] Ethan Stoneman and Joseph Packer, 'No, everything is not all right: Supernatural horror as pessimistic argument', *Horror Studies* 8:1 (2017), 25–43 (p. 26). Eugene Thacker, *Tentacles Longer Than Night* (Hants: Zero Books, 2015b).
[65] Stoneman and Packer, 'No, everything is not all right', p. 25.

through the encounter with metaphysical and affective negativity and even with death itself.[66] Nihilism gives licence to imaginative, discursive and often grotesque existential and political possibilities and is a precondition to self-destructive transgressions that are borne of a desire to reject predominant cultural and existential values or systems. Through the negation and rejection of predominant values or discursive systems, nihilism opens a space for antithetical thoughts to thrive. In what follows, I consider how transgressive and antagonistic acts and fantasies offer the reader, and the offending subject, a glimpse of the sought after, imaginative and self-destructive possibilities in practice. Historically speaking, there is no single or concrete concept of transgression that is 'so complicated, it must be detached from its questionable association to ethics' and 'irreducible to some polarized or oppositional concept to be wielded in an enfeebled dialectical challenge'.[67] As many critics have argued, 'disruptive action[s] of extremity' are constituent of identity as transgression is an essential part of social and subjective experience.[68] Building on established critical paradigms and practice in the fields of literary and philosophical transgression, I posit that both entropic and abstract transgressions still possess the capability to undermine and challenge conspiratorial systems of culture and power, and importantly, one's own subjective constitution.

Transgression is a contentious issue, with many critics strongly questioning the effect of the oversaturation of violence and misdemeanour in contemporary subjective, cultural and political life, and the extent to which transgression is now exhausted.[69] In modern western critical theory and philosophy (extending from Hegel, through Nietzsche and Durkheim, and then Bataille and Foucault in the twentieth century), transgression(s) demonstrated that rebellion, subversion and illegality, and the laws, systems or structures against which they are born are inextricably linked. For some, transgression that emerges in the antagonistic and cynical response to contemporary

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[66] Fred Botting, 'After Transgression: Bataille, Baudrillard, Ballard', in *Transgression and its Limits,* ed. by Matt Foley, Neil McRobert and Aspasia Stephanou (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 37–55 (p. 39); Georges Bataille, *Eroticism,* trans. by Mary Dalwood (London: Penguin, 2012 [1957a]), pp. 15, 13, 11.

[67] Michael Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews,* ed. and trans. by Donald F. Bouchard, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 29–52 (p. 35); Julian Wolfreys, *Transgression: Identity, Space, Time* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 130.

[68] Wolfreys. *Transgression*, p. 130; Chris Jenks, *Transgression* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 4.

[69] Ashley Tauchert, 'Preface Against Transgression: Bataillean 'Transgression' and its Colonization of Contemporary Critical Thought', *Against Transgression, Critical Quarterly*, 50:1 (2008), 15–42; Fred Botting, *Limits of Horror: Technology, Bodies, Gothic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008); *Transgression and its Limits,* ed. by Matt Foley, Neil McRobert and Aspasia Stephanou (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).

discontent is symptomatic of existential crisis. In addition, it corresponds to the fatalistic inability to engage with, or resolve concerns related to, cultural postmodernism, except in terms of nihilistic or antagonistic inertia or refusal.[70] For others, transgression is important as a mode of critique that deconstructs the juridical and ontological basis of hegemonic political authority and offers a roadmap for an effective, rebellious alternative within a contemporary neoliberal age.[71] As a political tactic, complex transgressive acts remain capable of threatening the legitimacy of authority structures and of undermining the hierarchical basis of social order. Furthermore, the will to transgress retains a radical – somewhat anarchist – function that will be looked at in closer detail in Chapters Two and Three, particularly in reference to the fictional protest movement in *Millennium People* and the rise of 'Project Mayhem' as politically motivated transgression and anarchy. However, it is as an artistic device that pertains to dangerous, eschatological and metaphysical fantasies that transgression reveals its truly radical and subversive potential.

The contemporary critical approach to transgression owes much to Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's benchmark study, which examined the power and limits of transgression to incite an effective political impact or change.[72] For Stallybrass and White, transgressions undermine symbolic hierarchies and perform a 'symbolic inversion' which, 'presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes' as a distinctly political tactic.[73] Rather than a subversion or carnivalesque reversal of boundaries, transgression in their study confirms the law's complicity in the construction and implementation of that which it forbids. As Stallybrass and many have since argued, transgression has a very real presence in actual-world cultural and political systems. However, it is as much a feature of the psychological makeup of the subject as it is an essential part of processes of subjective construction.[74] Georges Bataille argued that transgression is, above all else, an inner experience that exceeds the bounds of rational, everyday behaviour, labour and self-preservation. In this sense, the transgressive mode's value for many influenced by Bataille is evident in the

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[70] Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1997).

[71] Christina R. Foust, *Transgression as a Mode of Resistance: Rethinking Social Movement in an Era of Corporate Globalization* (New York: Lexington Books, 2010); See, also: *Transgression 2.0: Media, Culture and the Politics of a Digital Age,* ed. by David J. Gunkel and Ted Gournelos (New York: Continuum, 2011).

[72] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 2.

[73] Peter Stallybrass, *Politics and Poetics*, pp. 3–4, 17, 26.

[74] Jenks, *Transgression,* p. 4.

subjective/identity-forming implications that exceed dialectical confinement or application. As opposed to a simple rebellion against the socio-cultural norm(s), subjectivity itself is formed in the 'discontinuous negotiation with the transgressive' and, as a result, '[t]ransgression is the very pulse that constitutes our identities'.[75] Moreover, transgression is 'the imagined step beyond the self', a somewhat self-destructive losing of oneself within or to alternative and othered possibilities.[76] For many, the popular contemporary critical understanding of transgression 'is not in itself a plea for the overcoming of prohibitions so much as a heightened consciousness of the imperative structures and processes which allow the experience of transgression to be possible in the first place'.[77] In this regard, to transgress is to live in the realm of subjective possibility that demands a going 'beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment, law or convention'.[78]

In his benchmark study, *Transgression* (2003), Chris Jenks draws heavily from philosophical and literary, as well as sociological discourses, to measure the contemporary infatuation with disobedience and horror, and thus reconceive the boundaries of the transgressive within the contemporary. Instigated by an assumption or tension that something—i.e. some form of centre—is incomplete, transgression provides a means of completing it or changing it. Žižek, in his reading of transgression as inherent to ideology, recognises this, contending that the very emergence of a value (or ideological identification) markedly relies on this gap or distance from it, a distance which can only be negotiated through the transgression – that is, a value is only read as such in view of its distance from its unacceptable other.[79] Throughout this study, I engage with literary scenes of conduct wherein a subject goes beyond conceived limits in response to a perceived existential or material lack (or excess). By presenting this in their fictions, Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti each challenge their readers to question the extent to which transgression reveals 'the hyperbolic announcement of identity and difference' within a deadening, postmodern and unsettling capitalist society.[80]

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[75] Wolfreys, *Transgression*, p. 1.
[76] Wolfreys, *Transgression*, pp. 7; 15.
[77] Tauchert, p. 31.
[78] Jenks, *Transgression,* p. 2.
[79] Slavoj Žižek, 'The Inherent Transgression', *Cultural Values,* 2:1 (1998), pp. 1–17.
[80] Žižek, 'Inherent Transgression', p. 3.

The reapplication of transgression continues to incite valid and often emotive debate. Despite cultural obsessions with violence, excess and misdemeanour, I do not ascribe to the belief that transgression is now exhausted – complacent, possibly – yet remains capable of inciting feelings of horror and curiosity, and of exploring radical possibilities of cultural, political and philosophical alterity. Transgressions, both real and imagined, are characterised in their nihilistic refusal of subordination and rebuttal of constraint. The fictions that I examine in this thesis recreate nihilistic scenarios in which transgressive themes of violence, perversion, addiction, excess and death can be explored as speculative means of challenging hegemonic cultural and philosophical concerns. The question as to the practical use or value of such experiments remains. Nevertheless, in the pages that follow I present a short critical survey of those studies in literary transgression that have sought to answer this question. In so doing, I elaborate on how, as a distinctive literary mode, transgressive fictions respond and contribute to the cultural, political, artistic and philosophical debates so far outlined.

Critique of Transgressive Fictions

Under the guise of many different labels or definitions, critics of 'transgressive' literatures have sought to understand the literary exhibition of deviancy and transgression and to explore, through fictional works, the radical/subversive refusal of objective meaning, logic or imposed structures.[81] In recent decades, transgression is considered a literary technique that aids satirical and critical intentions within a specific political context.[82] More recently, literary examinations of transgressive behaviour in satiric fiction consider subjective challenges to convention and a nihilistic pursuit in themselves.[83] Similarly, politically charged readings have foregrounded transgression as necessary to realising an alternative to a neoliberal agenda that forecloses or co-opts any rational means of challenge to its authority.[84] In this section, I briefly cover a number of key critical dialogues in contemporary transgressive fiction and determine

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[81] Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*; Molly Hoey, 'The Lacuna of Usefulness: The Compulsion to "Understand" Transgressive Fiction', *Word and Text: A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics,* 4:1 (2014), pp. 26–39 (p. 28).

[82] Silverberg and Scholder, *High Risk*; Keith M. Booker. *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection and the Carnivalesque* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1991).

[83] Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fictions*, pp. 2–3.

[84] Annesley, *Globalization*, p. 8.

how such critiques influence my readings of the self-destructive reactions of fictional subjects in the important works of Easton Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti.

Transgressive fictions are antagonistic literatures of violence, sex, death and deviance intended to generate some sense of pleasure in the individual.[85] At their most recognisable, transgressive fictions exhibit the threatening or deviant crossing of limits, or possess a radical or subversive cultural element that 'frustrat[es] all the desires that a reader brings to the texts' through a refusal of objective meaning, logic or structure.[86] The term itself became popularised after *LA Times* columnist Michael Silverblatt used it to describe a range of texts in the 90s predicated on social and subjective 'deviance for the pleasure of the sovereign individual, where the desires of the depersonalizing subject can be projected onto the passive object'.[87] In these fictions, Sadean and Bataillean influenced violence/perversion act 'as a meeting place' in which the alienated postmodern and contemporary speaker confronts and challenges their ingrained scepticism at increasingly abstract concepts, dialectical or binary prohibitions and systems of power.[88] Characterised by their representations of extreme violence and in their attacks against ontological assumptions, for Kathryn Hume, transgressive – or 'aggressive' – fictions present a fictive model that contravenes the reader's expectation of a literary text.[89] A highly militarized form of novel, their value is attributed to their challenge of convention and service to a nihilistic pursuit of the 'closeness with death' as they open up a space for speculative and/or negative transgressive possibilities.[90]

One persistent method of reading transgressive fictions, or at least their literary instances or fantasies of violence and limit-crossing, has been to synthesise and understand these actions against the socio-political context of what Fredric Jameson calls 'omnipresent consumerism', in some cases attributing transgression(s) to a somewhat loud, brash, punk anti-politicism or anti-conformism.[91] James Annesley, for

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[85] Annesley, *Blank Fictions*; Young, *Shopping in Space*.

[86] Hoey, p. 28.

[87] Michael Silverblatt, "SHOCK APPEAL / Who Are These Writers, and Why Do They Want to Hurt Us?: The New Fiction of Transgression," *Los Angeles Times* (1 August 1993) <http://articles.latimes.com/1993-08-01/books/bk-21466_1_young-writers> [accessed 5 January 2016]; Hoey, p. 26.

[88] Mookerjee. *Transgressive Fictions*, pp. 3, 11.

[89] Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*.

[90] Mookerjee. *Transgressive Fictions*, pp. 2–3.

[91] Andrew Dix, Brian Jarvis and Paul Jenner, *The Contemporary American Novel in Context,* (London: Continuum, 2011); Annesley, *Globalization*; Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and the Market', in *Mapping Ideology,* ed. by Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1994), p. 291.

example, cites the political and cultural concerns within transgressive, 'Blank' fictions, demonstrating that paradigms of violence, sex and death present critical and antagonistic portraits of superficial consumer culture and the superfluous nature of the human condition. Additionally, he argues that politically charged readings foreground transgression as necessary to realising 'dreams of escape from, and rebellion against, consumer society and the forces of globalization'.[92] Despite this, transgressive fictions are not necessarily concerned with resolving socio-political difficulties. Instead, they present a much-needed confrontation with the troubling 'discourses that surround contemporary understandings of globalization and consumer society'.[93] As such, they often frustrate the reader, who, hoping to realise their subversive or violent fantasies, is 'confronted by the impossibility of any such fantasy' within a hegemonic capitalist system that neuters any real or affective alternative.[94] Excess is the logical by-product of an 'apocalyptic world progressively invaded by popular culture, permeated with technology and dominated by destruction'.[95] In response the critical engagement with the transgressive text today demands the development of a radical criticism that voices a re-evaluation of ethics and their contemporary cultural and political implications.

There is, however, a problem with the exclusively politically motivated or culturally subversive transgressive standpoint. Despite their anti-establishment and anti-social intentions, transgressive fictions have been assimilated into wider contemporary culture. *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* are cult works that define their generation's extreme culture. Ballard, likewise, is a canonical figure in modern and contemporary literature owing to his disturbing, dystopian themes and transgressive ethos. For readers and critics of transgressive fiction and art, the task should be to resist the temptation to demonstrate how these texts conform to, or validate a pre-existent version of, radicalism or to express anti-social and anti-establishment alternatives we expect. For transgressive art to remain essential, it must creatively, and with utter disregard for convention or propriety, respond to anxieties related to neoliberalism and contemporary culture, as well as the fundamental existential crisis incited by the negative effects of capitalism on human beings and expressed in contemporary fiction. To take this further, I believe that a new approach to, and

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[92] Annesley, *Globalization*, p. 8.
[93] Annesley, *Globalization*, p. 5.
[94] Hoey, p. 28.
[95] *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme,* ed. by Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 1.

understanding of, transgression is needed to reinvigorate the readings of such texts. Despite the strides in recent criticism towards redeeming a critical, political value in transgressive literatures, these readings are somewhat lacking in a failure to look beyond historicist or material political and social hierarchies and conditions. Crucially, many overlook the importance of subjective and existential terror/horror as a motivating factor in the desire to transgress. Additionally, many of these kinds of criticism fail to adequately examine important links between transgressive gestures and techniques as an extension of the Gothic mode, which I believe is an important leap to make.

If transgression stages the crossing and annihilation of limits, then the Gothic, which undermines unstable distinctions between reality and unreality, as well as laws/prohibitions and limits, is an essential frame against which to read transgressive literatures.[96] An understanding of the Gothic provides a means to understand the form and value of transgression within literature as a diverse and excessive mode that 'continues to shadow the progress of modernity with counter narratives displaying the underside of enlightenment and humanist values'.[97] Over recent decades, the rise in readings of the Gothic and horror have coincided with an increased critical awareness of transgressive themes and ethics, and I would contend, paves the way for the speculative remodelling of effective transgression as philosophical and corporeal self-destruction in contemporary literatures.

Gothic texts are literatures of interruption or violation, of uncanny disturbances and of the transgression of continuity. They thus represent a threat to rational subjective and cultural norms. To transgress 'is to appeal to a Gothic sensibility […] and so reveal perhaps the signs of a Gothic phenomenology, disturbing to, and disruptive [to] any realist mode of representation'.[98] In fact, it is not uncommon for critics to argue that the Gothic mode is currently the most effective means of undermining the nightmares of contemporary and neoliberal cultural and political situations. Moreover, the contemporary Gothic, as a cultural and literary phenomenon, is characterised by a self-destructive 'staging of the desire *for* trauma, the desire to be

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[96] Wolfreys, *Transgression,* pp. 97–8; *Gothic Fictions: Prohibition/Transgression,* ed. by Kenneth W. Graham (New York: AMS Press, 1989), p. 262; Susan Chaplin, *The Gothic and the Rule of Law: 1764–1820* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 4.
[97] Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014 [1993]), pp. 1–2.
[98] Wolfreys, *Transgression*, p. 98.

haunted' and is a subversive mode that speculatively expresses the fear and terror which underpins contemporary neoliberal society.[99] Building on this, my study explores the works of contemporary writers who (although not extensively read as Gothic) engage with themes of horror, desire and terror to confront a postmodern and contemporary epoch and a neoliberal hegemony.

As Maria Beville argues, the contemporary Gothic with its often monstrous, subversive and negative elements is often fused with a postmodern philosophical insurgency to blur or transgress 'the borders that exist between the real and the fictional'.[100] In the fictions of Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti, a similar approach is taken as the negativity attributed to real-world, postmodern and neoliberal praxis are challenged through speculative and fantastic explorations of excess, nihilism and monstrosity. The notion of monstrosity, in particular, serves a crucial transgressive function in contemporary Gothic fiction.[101] Whether as the literary manifestations of subjective and cultural anxieties or as figures/manifestations of *otherness*, acts of monstrosity and monstrous characters make apparent supposedly negative attributes. In so doing, they challenge the notion or representation of stability continuity and make visible the complacencies and paradoxes related to an accepted or rational order. While Gothic bodies are increasingly co-opted as popular cultural and market commodities in an age of postmodernity, excessive and self-destructive figures like those presented in the fictions of Ellis, Palahniuk and Ligotti, pose a grave challenge to the superficial domestication of monstrosity as they exceed and annihilate corporeal limits beyond the level that is customarily acceptable.[102] Taking this further, Xavier Aldana Reyes' *Body Gothic* and *Horror Film and Affect,* each go some way towards redefining a series of subgenres based on the transgression of corporeal limits and the centrality of affect in undermining and challenging subjective and cultural norms and preconceptions.[103] Throughout both, Aldana Reyes calls for an increased critical engagement with Gothic horror and corporeality as an effective means of re-defining

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[99] Alexandra Warwick, 'Feeling Gothicky?' *Gothic Studies,* 9:1 (2007), pp. 5–15 (p. 12).

[100] Beville, *Gothic-Postmodernism,* p. 15.

[101] This notion has been the subject of numerous contemporary studies including Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (London: Routledge, 2003); Andrew Hock-Soon Ng, *Dimensions of Monstrosity in Contemporary Narratives* (London: Macmillan, 2004); Maria Beville, *The Unnameable Monster in Literature and Film* (London: Routledge, 2013).

[102] Botting, *Limits of Horror*; See also: David McNally, *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism* (Boston: Brill, 2011).

[103] Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014); Aldana Reyes, *Horror Film and Affect*.

and contesting culturally pertinent limits, taboos and conventions. Through grotesque and visceral fictional representation of bodies and subjects exceeding themselves by falling apart, being opened up and/or somehow altered, corporeal transgression and violence demonstrate affective and often radical values. Here, the visceral and affective impact of excessive and (self)destructive transgression becomes a highly relevant area of critique when read against cultural, political and existential or subjective discourses.

Leading out from these urgent debates, I argue that Gothic and corporeal transgressions, displayed particularly in excessive and (self)destructive violence and fantasy provide a valid scope through which temporary fantasies of escape from physical and ontological discontent and constraint can be interrogated. So far, I have cited other important and influential studies to present the case for the need for an effective revision of transgression within literature. It is important to reiterate that not all 'blank', 'aggressive', 'satiric', or 'Gothic' fictions are explicit meditations on self-destruction, nor are they each definitively transgressive. Each framework, however, does offer valid perspectives for understanding a general mood of discontent in late postmodern and contemporary fictions that cannot be ignored, thus contributing to a shift from entropic violence and eroticism to more nihilistic, horrific and pessimistic engagements with existential and corporeal self-destruction. In response to the critical questioning of transgression in fiction, an increased critical attentiveness towards the affective prowess of transgressive and nihilistic fantasies of literary self-destruction against the corporeal body and the broader body of society is necessary.

Throughout the first half of this introduction, I have presented the theoretical case for literary transgression and self-destruction as a valid response to the perceived horror, nihilism and existential apathy attributable to the effects of neoliberal capitalism. Furthermore, I have sought to demonstrate that it is through the literary engagement with self-destruction that contemporary transgressive fictions present their most constructive attempts to explore an alternative to, or escape from, existential and socio-political discontent. As I have shown, the fictions studied in this thesis routinely exhibit themes of violence, perversion, death, addiction, excess and insanity characteristic of a wider literary mode. As a result, they can be firmly positioned within the traditions of philosophical and political transgression and nihilism thus far outlined. The question of the practical use or value of the exercise of transgression, however,

persists in contemporary fictions. In an extension of these urgent critical debates, I subject the works of Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti to rigorous scrutiny to uncover the extent to which an eschatological or transvaluative politics and ethics is revealed in their speculative and artistic portrayals of transgression, nihilism and self-destruction. In the second part of this introduction, I qualify fictions of self-destruction as a distinctive form of transgressive fiction and describe the significance of some of the literary and philosophical figures who have influenced this contemporary iteration of literary transgression. I then proceed to qualify the four authors who occupy this study as key stylistic and intellectual pioneers of a distinctive literary mode predicated on the exploration of fictional experiences of self-destruction. Finally, I present a short overview of the four chapters which follow, justifying the methodological decisions taken within this thesis and qualifying my readings of subjective and socio-political transgressions within these fictions.

The Value of Contemporary Transgressive Fictions

Transgressive Fictions (1): A Brief Critical Genealogy

Confronting the transgressive subject within literature is no small task, not least owing to the paradoxical nature of transgression, regarded as insurgency against limits and the law, and the precondition against which all laws and limits exist. Matt Foley, Neil McRobert and Aspasia Stephanou's edited collection *Transgression and its Limits* (2012) asks what limits remain that the transgressive act must breach to maintain its effectiveness. The answer, they postulate, resides in the need to extract a subjective reasoning within the act of transgression 'in the real', and an acknowledgement of the affective impact of transgression. Opposed to 'pseudo or simulated transgression(s) in which the subject is viewer rather than participant', affective transgression in literature refers to the discordant and subversive (self-damaging) acts taken by the literary subject as a matter of personal responsibility.[104] The task then, in critical readings of transgression in contemporary fiction, is to address the relevance and validity of expressive and affective forms of conduct that overstep the limits of

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[104] Foley, 'Introduction', in *Transgression and its Limits,* p. xxiii.

convention and acceptability and to assess critically their political and existential implications.

This thesis moves studies of literary transgression beyond satire, which as Graham Matthews asserts, 'offers an opportunity to temporarily suspend taboos […] in aggressive and instinctual behaviour'.[105] Satire is linked to transgression in the sense that both explore the darker and more contentious aspects of culture and society, and in so doing they interrupt 'the dialectic of margin and centre' that culminates in a 'subversion' of the rationalistic or complete and acceptable world view.[106] The literatures and theories examined in this thesis show that transgressive ontological and corporeal behaviours, particularly those that are self-destructive in their outcome, signal a provocative approach to imagining an alternative to or respite from existential and socio-political discontent. While similar in many regards to satiric fictions, transgressive fictions not only expose culture and power to ridicule and critique, but they seek to explore and propose activities which cannot be sublimated into the rational world-view. They uncover the existential and metaphorical value of self-destruction as a literary or philosophical response to, or refusal of, a neoliberal cultural-political situation that, for many, incites only feelings of distress, antipathy and palpable horror. To qualify the focus on literary transgression (more so that satire) it is necessary to explore the literatures and ideas that have influenced the contemporary transgressive novel. It is this way possible to assess the extent to which an emphasis on self-destruction has developed over the course of time to articulate a successful 'post-modern version of authentic or existential action' in what is often described as 'an increasingly desensitised and simulated postmodern culture'.[107]

As one of the most significant contributions to the development of a widely recognised mode of literary transgression, the Marquis de Sade's novels are highly subversive satires of political, philosophical and existential transgression that challenge moral and dogmatic presuppositions. Sadean literary transgression (and indeed his monstrous nihilism) pushes 'the boundaries of what is humanly/inhumanly' possible, to ascertain a sexual or affirmative gratification and admonish religious, political and social authority.[108] Throughout his 'libertine' novels, Sade interrogated the

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[105] Matthews, *Ethics and Desire,* p. 29.
[106] Matthews, *Ethics and Desire,* p. 16.
[107] Jenks, *Transgression,* p. 3; Foley, 'Introduction', in *Transgression and its Limits,* p. xxiii.
[108] John Phillips, *How to Read Sade* (London: Granta, 2005) p. 65.

'politically and socially subversive possibilities of pornography to their furthest possible extreme' to transgress and annihilate metaphysical and corporeal limits in search of a form of self-affective otherness.[109] Routinely revered and chastised, Sade's literary reputation has been the subject of fierce debate over the years.[110] Bataille describes Sade as 'a monster, obsessed by the idea of an *impossible* liberty', whilst John Attarian describes him as a nihilistic writer of 'demonic genius' whose works 'presented for the first time, a philosophy of nihilism, and illustrated all its evil consequences and implications'.[111] For Albert Camus, Sade is lauded as 'the first theoretician of absolute rebellion', whose materialist vision of humanity acting out its monstrous nature pronounced him as the archetypal political rebel and early nihilistic propagator.[112] As a thematically 'modern' writer, Sade's literature has presented a model for future transgressive works to follow in the literary integration of the 'subterranean and the aboveground, often using sexuality and carnality as a meeting place between the two'.[113]

Sade's speculative positioning of grotesque and subversive free-thinking against a predominant 'moral' economy or society proves particularly attractive today. As John Phillips argues, Sade's libertine works closely reference the Bakhtinian notion of grotesque realism as a precursor to positive (and negative) political action.[114] Moreover, in their violent and grotesque abuse of bodies, they strike a relevant pessimistic tone that sees very little cause for optimism in politics or in humanity and propose a framework in which to explore and transgress the hidden and obscene underside of a repressive rule of law.[115] In response, the return to and re-application of Sade's distinctive literary and philosophical framework of transgression, often referred to throughout this thesis, is advantageous as modern and contemporary

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[109] Lynn Hunt, 'Pornography and the French Revolution', *The Invention of Pornography,* ed. by Lynn Hunt (New York, Zone Books, 1996), pp. 301–39 (p. 330); John Phillips, 'Obscenity Off the Scene: Sade's *La Philosophy dans le Boudoir'*, *The Eighteenth Century,* 53:2 (2012), pp. 163–74 (p. 163). It is widely acknowledged that the novels *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785)*, Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue* (1791)*, Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795), and *Juliette* (1797–1801), constitute Sade's most recognisable 'Libertine' novels
[110] See: Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression'; J. Larson, 'Albert Camus' *Caligula* and the Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade', *Philosophy and Literature,* 37:2 (2013), pp. 360–73; Maria Vara, 'Gothic Permutations from the 1790s to the 1970s: Rethinking the Marquis de Sade's Legacy', in *Le Gothic,* ed. by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik (New York: Palgrave, 2008) pp. 100–15; Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* (London: Virago Pres, 1979).
[111] Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil* (London: Penguin, 2012 [1957b]), p. 91; John Attarian, 'Dostoyevsky vs. the Marquis de Sade', *Modern Age,* fall (2004), 342–351 (pp. 351; 342).
[112] Albert Camus, *The Rebel,* trans. by Anthony Bower (London: Penguin, 2013 [1951]), pp. 14–25.
[113] Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction*, p. 11. See also John Phillips, 'Introduction' in The Marquis de Sade, *Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue,* trans. by John Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012 [1791]), p. xxxiii.
[114] Phillips, 'Obscenity', p. 164.
[115] Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* (London: Verso, 2002).

transgressive authors (including those here studied) exhibit a certain continuity or fraternity with Sade in their flagrant abandon of the acceptable and their 'liberal' and excessive approach to violence and destruction. Based on the evident recuperation of Sadean themes in contemporary transgressive fiction, the Sadean model of grotesque and self-destructive transgression offer a means through which to explore fantasies that necessarily negate or abandon the socio-political and existential proclivities and establish new politics or practices of social conduct.

Like Sade, contemporary transgressive fictions remain sceptical of politics but can rarely imagine a viable or universally appealing alternative that is free of ethical and moral constraint. In the fictions of Ellis and Ballard, and to a certain extent, Palahniuk and Ligotti, the influence of Sadean literary transgression and philosophical rebellion is clear. Ellis's *American Psycho* antagonised its readership through excessive, Sadean scenes of grotesque, sexual violence that challenge nature and distort perceptions of bodies and sex beyond what is, palatable, conventional or acceptable. Similarly, in Palahniuk's *Fight Club,* Tyler Durden's unwavering transgressive repudiation of established political order, cultural proclivities and desire for a total freedom (at whatever cost) also seems distinctly Sadean. Perhaps most overtly, in *Cocaine Nights,* and *Super-Cannes*, Ballard presents a litany of arch-protagonists who pose disturbing models for a more authentic society predicated on self-gratifying, violent and libidinous excess that imaginatively recalls Sade's *120 Days* or *Philosophy in the Bedroom*.

Ultimately, philosophical negation in its deepest sense – the disobedient and self-destructive estrangement from authority – characterises the transgressive fictions of Sade. As such, Sade can be read a forerunner to the likes Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and many surrealist and avant-garde writers, like Lautréamont (Isidore Lucien Ducasse), Bataille and Artaud, who have influenced the fiction of the authors studied in this thesis. As in Sade, Ellis, Palahniuk and Ballard, Thomas Ligotti's horror fictions attack their reader's ontological and moral standards and undermine any positivist reading of the contemporary human experience. In the literary engagement with and celebration of moral decline and death, and despite the dichotomy between Sadean affirmation and Ligotti's pessimism, the later re-appropriates the former's thematic engagement with ecstatic and grotesque forms of transgression to literalise the experience of subjective/existential suffering and disappointment. Throughout all the

respective works here alluded to, Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti, to varying degrees re-appropriate Sadean tropes to explore the dissolution of values, the negation of optimism or virtue and a pragmatic desire for pleasure with immediacy in the late 20th and early 21st century. In their own subversive literary and philosophical experimentations with destructive corporeality, these four authors explore grotesque, neo-Sadean fantasies of human lives lived freely and self-destructively in spite of modern society. Consequently, Sade's dark, libertine works exhibit a critical, artistic and philosophical pathway for undermining authority and politics which has contributed significantly to the development and critical revalidation of transgression and self-destruction in contemporary literatures.

After Sade, the twentieth-century French author/philosopher and so-called 'prophet of transgression' George Bataille stands out as a key influence on contemporary transgressive fictions.[116] Whereas Sadean excess demonstrates an affront to social norms – often through the flesh – the concept of negation and transgression appears in Bataille as a spiritual endeavour or debauchery that soils body and thought. In his literary career, Bataille sought to re-purpose the negative and excessive abstract practices of capitalism against the system through an advocacy of excessive consumption in pursuit of something other or sovereign that would undermine utility and economic order.[117] Moreover, his non-fiction works, particularly *Eroticism* (1957) and *The Accursed Share* (1949) are symptomatic of his paradigm-defining project that speculates about the 'possibilities of transgression' through the reconceptualization of eroticism, violence and excesses in the modern world.[118] Like Sade, Bataille's imaginative extension of the philosophical and literary condemnation of authority is pronounced. His speculative exposition of the negative effects 'that [capitalist modes] of production inserts […] in the relationships between people', also proves influential.[119] In fact, contemporary authors have sought to model their own fantasies of transgression against socio-economic practices and abstractions on excessive and subversive tropes similar to those pursued by Bataille.

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[116] Benjamin Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 1.
[117] Jenks, *Transgression*, pp. 103–4
[118] Vartan P. Messier, 'Cannons of Transgression: Shock, Scandal and Subversion in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*.' (Master's thesis, University of Puerto Rico: Mayaguez, 2005), p. 64.
[119] Jenks, *Transgression,* p. 88.

Despite this, Bataille's contemporary reception has been challenged. Žižek, for one, has argued that Bataille's intellectual transgressions have been nullified, subsumed, and exceeded by 'the late capitalist excessive orgy of the system itself'.[120] This criticism seems a rehearsal of Sartre's critique of Bataille wherein he argued that the latter merely replaces (necessary and sought after) dialectic and revolution with 'the paralysed revolt of transgression'.[121] As a result, for a number of critics, Bataillean transgression 'can only really express the forces of very late capitalism', rather than forces or possibilities beyond it.[122] Fred Botting and Scott Wilson offer a valid counter argument, suggesting that if 'the world is becoming more like a Bataillean universe rather than less', then Bataillean literary transgression, that sought to overcome boundaries and pursue an experience of stimulating horror, is a valid stimulus in the formulation of a radical response to modern existential disillusionment and socio-political vitriol.[123] My readings share this sentiment as I posit that Bataille's fiction and thought (particularly those on eroticism and economy) demonstrate a transferable and relevant disruptive value which today reveals itself in literary fantasies of horrific transgression, the negation of both (acceptable) society and self, and in (self)destruction.[124]

For Bataille, 'literature is either essential or nothing' and 'the Evil […] which it expresses' signals a transgressive journey beyond conventional formations of morality and toward a sense of totality or freedom that, for many of his literary characters, manifests itself in their self-destructive enterprise.[125] In his most famous novel *Story of the Eye* (1928)*,* Bataille's protagonists seek to abandon the real world and revel in their negation of the 'nightmare of human society'.[126] Following a string of controversies, the narrator flees and contemplates suicide, then, after losing 'any sense of words like hope or despair', he disavows his former self in pursuit of the fulfilment of otherwise unacceptable, transgressive and debauched fantasies with his partner, Simone.[127] Throughout the novel, the offenders go beyond any presupposed

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[120] Slavoj Žižek, *the Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2003a), p. 56.

[121] Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, p. 41.

[122] Tauchert, 'Preface Against Transgression', p. 20.

[123] Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 18.

[124] Benjamin Noys, 'Shattering the Subject: Georges Bataille and the Limits of Therapy' *European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counselling,* 7:3 (2005), 125–136 (p. 126).

[125] Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, p. 3.

[126] Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye,* trans. by Joachim Neugroschal (London: Penguin, 2001 [1928]), p. 29.

[127] Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, p. 20.

notions of acceptability and unacceptability, acting only out of a desire to please themselves and achieve an ultimately self-destructive, total sense of freedom. Beginning in 'despair and inner crisis', this 'movement toward wholeness' inevitably leads toward the absence or negation of morality and sense.[128] The process of abandoning one's essential rational and moral framework to desire is a self-destructive one, but one in which a disconcerting possibility emerges wherein a 'perfect nakedness is revealed' and so too a disorientating/traumatic lack of recourse, without which the subject collapses into an outcome of 'endless incoherence'.[129]

While evident to a certain extent in Ellis and Ballard, Palahniuk's fictions draw the greatest direct influence from Bataille in their critical approach to transgressive excess and death, particularly in the context of community. Bataille argued that conventional morals are not a suitable basis for society, owing to the fragility and fluidity between limits and transgressions as a structural foundation. In *Story of the Eye,* the protagonists abandon conventional society and establish their own model community predicated on an ecstatic and horrific engagement with transgression and renegotiation of corporeal and metaphysical limits. This is precisely the narrative journey followed in texts like *Fight Club, Invisible Monsters* (1999)*,* and *Haunted*. Both Bataille and Palahniuk also share in their advocacy of the transgression of the body and confrontation of death as means towards a desired sense of freedom or alternative. Likewise, in Ballard's late fictions, anguished outsiders and rebels, like Penrose (*Super-Cannes*) and Markham (*Millennium People*), seek affirmation and a fundamental, existential change through a communal engagement with eroticism, violence and death. Through shared, self-destructive experiences, both metaphorical or actual, Ballard's and Palahniuk's fictions re-interpret Bataillean speculative philosophical calls for a sacred, self-affirming inner experience that annihilates preconceived notions of bodily and ontological limits and morality. As Noys confirms, Bataille's language of transgression offers a model of extremity that challenges complacencies and 'fractures the calm surface' via transgressive bodily states and actions.[130] The use of such a transgressive and critical model is in evidence throughout this thesis as excess and base eroticism often forms the basis for rebellious outsiders

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[128] Georges Bataille, 'On Nietzsche: The Will to Chance' in *The Bataille Reader,* ed. by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 339.
[129] Bataille, 'On Nietzsche', p. 339.
[130] Noys, 'Shattering the Subject', p. 126.

to pursue their desire for radical alterity or the negation of the real world. To varying degree, the writers studied here articulate transgressions of the body through literary scenes of eroticism, consumption, death and the negation of wider society, and in the process, contravene idiosyncratic and cultural moral boundaries, 'open[ing] the door into what lies beyond the limits usually overserved'.[131]

Drawing on the influence of Sade and Bataille, the mid-to late period of the 20th century proved significant in the development of transgressive fictions. During this period new literary avenues of response to subjective and cultural frustrations related to cultural postmodernism, the commoditisation of entropic horror and eroticism, and the speculative alternative (or, notably, the distinct lack therein) to capitalist hegemony were explored. In this respect, William S. Burroughs, Angela Carter, Poppy Z. Brite and Dennis Cooper are noteworthy in their contributions towards the development of self-destruction as a central and requisite concern in readings of transgressive fiction. These writers influentially sought not to only break the rules and present a challenge to hegemony but also to look for new and ever-more extreme ways in which to do this through their writings. I consider these writers to hold important precursory positions in the development and shift from entropic transgressive fictions to a truly shocking and subversive fiction of self-destruction within the mid-to-late period of the twentieth century. These four authors prove influential in the development of a subversive breed of transgressive fictions that propose a philosophical and aesthetic engagement with self-destruction in the late twentieth century. The rationale for not including Brite and Cooper in detail in this dissertation is that both present violence and destruction against an other as an affirmative endgame in itself. In their fictions, deviance and transgression (like the authors closely examined in this thesis) represent an act or fantasy of serious metaphysical and metaphorical importance. Indeed, the violence against another, or multiple others, becomes for Cooper and Brite's protagonists a serialised expression of one's own incompletion and part of a journey towards fulfilment. It is my contention that the likes of Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti go a stage further, exploring the possibility of an alternative or escape that follows the specifically self-destructive, rather than homicidal, act or fantasy. Nonetheless, Burroughs, Carter, Brite and Cooper are exemplary, radical authors whose fictions challenge socio-political and cultural concerns. A brief introduction of these authors

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[131] Bataille, *Eroticism*, pp. 63; 67.

and their extreme literary engagements with transgression presents many subversive philosophical and critical provocations that contribute to the revalidation of abject, horrific and negativist subject matter. Their culmination, I posit, is the advent of self-destruction as a literary concern in contemporary fiction.

Throughout his experimental works, William S. Burroughs sought to militarise and disjoint language and narrative form in an attempt 'to liberate Western consciousness from its own form of self-express[ion], from the language that we think we use but which, in truth, uses us'.[132] Testament to this is that Burroughs' influential self-destructive fictions have been described by Ballard as 'comic, paranoid, visionary, delirious' exposés of the nightmare of the 20th century.[133] His most celebrated novel, *Naked Lunch* (1959)*, follows a number of grotesque characters who engage in taboo sexual encounters and indulge in self-destructive drug abuse. For many readers, such odious subject matter relegates *Naked Lunch* to 'the very margins of the literary', as 'self-indulgent psychosis masquerading as art'.[134] A more celebratory tone is struck by the likes of Fiona Paton, who reads the novel as a satirisation of addiction as a transgressive form of desire.[135] Similarly, David Punter lauds Burroughs as 'one of the most self-conscious of guides through an addicted world which is violently dislocated from linear time'.[136] Burroughs proves a formative influence on the authors I later introduce, as his fictions examined how self-destructive compulsions become '[p]art of the global conspiracy […] to reduce us to the total dependency of addicts' within a nightmarish scene of political and corporate hegemony.[137] His fiction also reminds us of the extent to which an aesthetic focus on otherness, transgression and negativity challenges the very notion of how 'independence' itself becomes a perversion of the subject within a capitalist culture.

Similarly, Angela Carter's works brought into sharp critical focus the inconsistencies and tyrannies of modern culture through disturbing, experimental narrative forays into transgression, sadism, masochism, eroticism and, in some

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[132] Ann Douglas, '"Punching a Hole in the Big Lie": The Achievement of William S. Burroughs' in *Word Virus: The William Burroughs Reader,* ed. by James Grauerholz and Ira Silverberg (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), pp. xv–xxviii (pp. xxiii–xxiv).

[133] J.G. Ballard, 'Introduction', in William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text,* ed. by James Grauerholz and Barry Miles (London: Harper Perennial, 2005 [1959]).

[134] Fiona Paton, '*Naked Lunch*, National Insecurity, and the Gothic Fifties', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language,* 52:1 (2010), pp. 48–69 (pp. 50–1).

[135] Paton, '*Naked Lunch*, pp. 50–1.

[136] David Punter, 'William Burroughs: The Scene of Addiction', *Gothic Studies,* 11:2 (2009), pp. 74–82 (p. 74).

[137] Punter, 'Scene of Addiction', p. 76.

instances, necrophilia, implied bestiality and even fetishist scopophilia. Carter's work places notable 'emphasis on liberated lifestyles', no matter the cost.[138] Her works pursue a revolution against constraint, be it moral, ethical or societal, unleashing what has been described as a 'veritable pageant of chaos, irrationality, absurd pleasure and spasmodic desire', and building on Sadean and Bataillean literary explorations of sovereign power and transgressive eroticism.[139] Indeed, one of her most famous and transgressive claims was her philosophical and literary recuperation of Sadean paradigms and discourse in the service of feminism, in *The Sadeian Woman* (1979). With 'more to do with treason than reason', the literary aberrations in novels like *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) and *Heroes and Villains* (1969), for example, serve as highly influential 'allegorical correlatives for the societal evils of tyranny, intolerance, persecution and corruption'.[140] Most closely aligned with feminism and magical realism, Carter's non-realist novels are provocative mediations on identity and affirmation in the wake of and in opposition to oppressive power structures and discourse. Moreover, Carter's literature turns to the body as a discursive site against which to explore and respond to the cultural, societal and indeed philosophical concerns of the modern period. As Robin Mookerjee suggests, Carter's works are important in the gestation of a valid, contemporary application of transgressive fiction as they effectively 'strip away virtually every kind of socially mediated identity or philosophy, leaving only the ineffable wisdom of the body'.[141]

Of the many so-called transgressive authors working today, but not included at length in this study, Dennis Cooper and Poppy Z. Brite particularly stand out as influences toward the development of contemporary transgressive fictions. Their fictions exhibit a demonstrable turn towards existential and horrific themes of self-destruction, as opposed to an overtly political or satirical application of trite carnivalesque play or gratuitous entropic violence or deviance. Throughout their literary careers, which for Cooper began in the late 1970s and for Brite in the 1990s, both have provocatively engaged with literary tropes of body horror, sadism, eroticism and violence in their notoriously subversive and rebellious fictions. The unfettered

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[138] Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction*, p. 169.
[139] Dani Cavallaro, *The World of Angela Carter: A Critical Investigation* (London: McFarland & Company, 2011), p. 12.
[140] *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism,* ed. by Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (London: Longman, 1997) p. 17; Cavallaro, *Angela Carter,* p. 15.
[141] Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction,* p. 196.

violence against bodies and others in fictions such as Brite's *Exquisite Corpse* (1996) and Cooper's *Frisk* (1991), for example, build on a literary exploration of insatiable desire that had been posited in the works of Burroughs and Carter.

Cooper's transgressive fictions, most notably *Frisk* and *Try* (1994)*,* are steeped in a philosophical will on the part of his protagonists to achieve enlightenment and affirmation through the acting out of their sexual and violent fantasies. Whilst Cooper's teenage boys are purposely drawn as 'blank and stunned and inarticulate', they outright 'refuse to remain deadened; they seem to fight their way […] into individuality'.[142] This longing for affirmation also underpins Brite's controversial novel, *Exquisite Corpse,* in which two serial killers engage in sadistic rituals of sexual and violent deviancy in their fulfilment of an unremitting lust. Brite's scenes of serial torture, cannibalism and sexual violence and the depiction of murder, rape and necrophilia undermine and transgress any pre-supposed limit of what is acceptable (or palatable to Brite's readership and publishers, as literary and artistic expression). When *Exquisite Corpse*'s two serial killers, Jay and Andrew, eat their victims, 'they attempt to dissolve the separations between their own bodies and the bodies of the others', and in so doing, symbolically '[obliterate] the social limit between the self and other'.[143] Like Cooper, Brite's dark fantasies of corporeal excess and destruction provoke a critical reassessment of literary transgression, particularly as they aim to unsettle their readership through an emphasis and engagement with subversion through sadism and horrific spectacle.

Transgression and debauchery provide both Brite and Cooper with the inspiration for many of their novels throughout the 1990s and 2000s. As exemplary literary stylists, as well as theoretically conscientious and rebellious authors, Brite and Cooper each engage with postmodern abstractions of violence and horror in ways that de-centre violence as a material concern.[144] Both novelists present the transgressive and homicidal compulsion for the destruction of others as a means of elevating and even completing the subject as they attempt to fulfil a deep-seated desire for communal or even romantic affirmation.[145] The 'spectacles of consumption' that are

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[142] Young, *Shopping in Space*, p. 240.
[143] Susan E. Cook, 'Subversion Without Limits: From *Secretary'*s Transgressive S/M to *Exquisite Corpse*'s Subversive Sadomasochism', *Discourse,* 28:1 (2006), pp. 121–141 (p. 123).
[144] Annesley, *Blank Fictions,* p. 37.
[145] Deborah Wills, 'Fatal Attractions: "Snuff Fiction" and the Homicidal Romance', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature,* 47:2 (2014), pp. 67–83.

synonymous with their works allow for the novels' protagonists to 'critique both common contemporary […] romantic conventions and, in a broader sense, an enervated, solipsistic and violent culture'.[146] In this way, their expressive and excessive fictions allude towards a means of critiquing the cultural preoccupation with/mediation of transgression and begin to explore violent desire as a means to annihilate 'the self-other limit' and articulate subversive (and sometimes eschatological) possibilities premised on the horrific expression of subjective fantasy.[147]

Cooper and Brite's fictions share a clear lineage with the four authors I study at length in this thesis in their engagement with gratuitous violence and transgression. Their works further confirm that transgressive fictions maintain a crucial and unsettling hold on the contemporary psyche and explore further avenues of eschatological possibility through transgression. Their fictions disclose subtle differences in emphasis from those I study in the subsequent chapters. Violence and nihilism are traceable to varying degrees in the fictions and authors here cited, from Sade onwards. In Cooper and Brite, annihilating acts of cannibalistic, sadistic and murderous violence become synonymous with monstrous characters who, responding to an existential lack or sense of extreme socio-political frustration, desire to elevate or complete themselves. In this regard, novels like *Frisk* and *Exquisite Corpse* present transgression as an outwardly directed, affirmative gesture. By contrast, Ellis, Ballard, Palahniuk and Ligotti provide this study with an important sample of literatures that examine self-destructive modes of recourse that respond to the failure of outwardly directed actions of violence and destruction.

Though I contest that self-destructive tropes are becoming more pronounced in contemporary fictions and have cited Ellis, Ballard, Palahniuk and Ligotti as demonstrative of this, I refute the suggestion that this is a male-centric issue. Julie A. Chappell and Mallory Young's recent edited collection, *Bad Girls and Transgressive Women in Popular Television, Fiction and Film* (2017), and Sabrina Fuchs Abrams' edited collection on transgression and satire, *Transgressive Humor of American Women Writers* (2017), for example, demonstrate the ongoing significance of the female voice within transgressive discourses. Their studies present a range of timely

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[146] Wills, p. 70.
[147] Cook, p. 138.

and diverse readings of transgressive women in culture and media, tracing the cultural attitudes towards them against ongoing critical debates about power, freedom, sexuality and gender. Writing particularly on horror and gender, Barbara Creed's seminal *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) developed the notion of the monstrous-feminine as a counter to problematic representations of the female and femininity in horror cinema and for Rosalind Gill, post-feminism challenges discourse that presents women as 'autonomous agents no longer constrained by inequalities'.[148] Similarly, a recent edition of *The Dark Arts Journal,* was dedicated to examining how transgressive and self-destructive female characters in Gothic and horror film and fiction effectively oppose and counter problematic and gendered models of social and political convention, thus highlighting the necessity of the critical study of the destructive female transgressor in a variety of extreme and horrific guises.[149] Most recently, Catherine McDermott's thesis entitled 'Contemporary Femininities after Postfeminism' (2018) examines the relationship between postfeminist discourses of empowerment and the construction of female subjectivity and the destructive and affective registers of contemporary fiction, challenging the sense of inertia that proliferates neoliberal culture and postfeminist theory.[150]

Many transgressive novels that engage with the female experience within postmodern and neoliberal societies, take a position that seeks to reassert a sense of female freedom and agency (that is, a freedom to misbehave, to transgress and to rebel), or satirically and critically undermines the 'false' freedoms afforded to women and female characters. Texts by female authors, such as Joyce Carol Oates's *Zombie* (1995), A.M. Holmes's *End of Alice* (1996), Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012), Alissa Nutting's *Tampa* (2013), Naomi Alderman's *Power* (2016), and Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (2018) demonstrate that contemporary transgressive fiction is not the sole property of male writers. Indeed, those alluded to are some of the most controversial, transgressive or ethically contentious novels of recent decades owing to their highly critical and stylistic portrayals of violence, sadism, transgression and their animosity towards contemporary culture and society. If freedom is the central

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[148] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Femininsm, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge,1993); Rosalind Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility' *European Journal of Cultural Studies,* 10:2 (2007) 147–166 (p. 153).
[149] 'Female Transgression', *The Dark Arts Journal,* 4.1 (2018), ed. by Rachid M'Rabty.
[150] Catherine McDermott, 'Contemporary Femininities After Postfeminism: Genre, Affect, Aesthetics' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University, 2018).

concern raised in postfeminist transgressive fiction, it also leads to an exploration and confrontation with the destructive implications of this as freedom dissipates into an illusion of free choice within the specific coordinates of postmodern and neoliberal culture and society. While the implications of this impasse are of critical importance, my own study is less invested in the gendered approach to this concern as it is with the broader, existential response to this. The desire throughout this dissertation is not to think about the nauseating experience of contemporary postmodern and neoliberal subjectivity in strict terms of gendered identities, but as a wider, human concern.

Though my own readings often focus mostly on male characters, in works composed by male authors, my concern is fundamentally with the contemporary subject as a suffering entity in these fictions. It can be perceived as contentions that novels like *American Psycho* and *Fight Club,* which are highly problematic from a feminist perspective (owing to their depictions of misogynistic violence or patriarchal, exclusionary social constructs) feature prominently, though I must be clear: This is in no way reflective of an assessment that male voices are more imperative than their female counterparts. Instead, it follows an assessment that these novels – for reasons identified in the following section – are the most proficient in foregrounding speculative, transgressive and self-destructive responses to the suffering or disaffected human condition living under the auspices of postmodern, neoliberal society. Turning away, then, from postfeminist modes of address, which explore the cruel optimism and destructive impact of society and contemporary culture on female subjectivity, just as I avoid entering to debates about masculinity in crisis, I read the subjects of these fictions as equal representatives of the abused human subject within contemporary society.

I have briefly outlined a critical genealogy of transgressive literary self-destruction from Sade to contemporary authors, evidencing a self-destructive 'turn' in transgressive fiction in lieu of a valid political and economic alternative. This shift demarcates a reading of the self (as an ontological and corporeal entity) as the only remaining and tangible site to be transgressed within a capitalist realist world that resists and co-opts the outward and affirmative projection of transgression as a means of resistance. Since the 1980s, cultural and subjective frustrations are intensified within a nihilistic culture of excess and neoliberal capitalism. As a result, fictions of the late-1980s, 1990s and onwards display two major characteristics. Firstly, a growing

frustration in their failed attempts to affirm oneself through typically transgressive means. Secondly, a sense of embitterment towards both the complacent, blank subject and powerful cultural-economic apparatus underpinned by violence and nihilism. The kinds of fictions studied in Chapters One through Four (introduced in the following pages), are demonstrative of this pessimistic shift in attitude. Moreover, they show a fully contemporised engagement with monstrous violence, nihilism and self-destruction in stylistic and philosophical ways that owe much to the traditions of transgressive writing highlighted in this introduction.

Transgressive Fictions (2): Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard, Ligotti

Kathy Acker, in her short story 'Algeria' (1984) wrote that 'SUICIDE AND SELF-DESTRUCTION // IS THE FIRST WAY THE SHITTED-ON START SHOWING // ANGER AGAINST THE SHITTERS'.[151] The fictions I examine throughout this thesis build on and extend this provocative conceit in their abject, sometimes horrific and always challenging face-off with socio-political and existential discontent and trauma. It is correct to highlight that fictions of authors not included in this study, such as Poppy Z. Brite, Irvine Welsh, Michel Houellebecq and Dennis Cooper, to name a few, share an engagement with self-destruction through themes of cultural and subjective frustration and a vociferous opposition to contemporary neoliberal culture and society. It can be argued that in some cases, their engagement with transgressive themes of abject violence, sexual deviancy, psychopathology and philosophical/ontological nihilism is even more pronounced than in the works of those that I focus on. However, as I show in the following pages, Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti, and their respective fictions are key sources of critical and artistic intrigue that foreground and engage with the need to look beyond entropic transgression and towards self-destruction in fictions post-1990. Thematically, each of these four writers reveals an expressive distaste for contemporary neoliberalism citing both material and existential concerns. What is more, each encounters a limit to the effectiveness of transgression to incite an affirmative change in the subject or world, and explores a defiant means of moving beyond this point (be it through the retreat into rebellious and self-

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[151] Kathy Acker, 'Algeria' (1984), excerpt taken from *Hannibal Lecter, my Father* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 1991) in *Hatred of Capitalism: A Semiotext(e) Reader,* ed. by Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2001), p. 104.

destructive communities, or the escape into horrific, sadistic and suicidal fantasies). As a means of overcoming such obstacles, the works of Palahniuk, Ellis, Ballard and Ligotti are symptomatic and instructive of the turn to nihilistic and pessimistic fantasies of self-destruction as a means of escape and discordance in contemporary transgressive fiction.

The American novelist, Bret Easton Ellis has a well-established reputation as a popular and controversial author whose works present novel and dangerous attempts to undermine socio-political targets.[152] Novels such as *American Psycho* (1991), *Glamorama* (1998) and *Lunar Park* (2005) exhibit Ellis's importance as an accomplished literary stylist and show a mature engagement with and against literary and cultural postmodernism, neoliberalism and transgression, as well as the ethics and aesthetics of violence and horror, and revivify claims he is the *enfant terrible* of contemporary American letters. It is Ellis's morally and ethically challenging engagement with violence and the intensity (or deficit of it) in his fictions which has made him intriguing to a succession of literary critics who have sought to resolve his works' ethically and philosophically subversive implications against the blank and tedious violence, hedonism and decadence they routinely describe.[153] *American Psycho* is an important benchmark or watershed text in the conception of an identifiably contemporary mode of transgressive fiction.

Despite the swathes of critical material already published on Ellis and his works, I focus on Ellis's third and most notorious novel, as it is symptomatic of a culture dominated by the interaction between capitalism and violence and because the novel signposts a shift in the approach to transgression as an affective and valid means of contestation. Notably, it contributes towards a rethinking of the use/value of transgression in literature that moves from affirmation to frustration and nihilism, then to horror and pessimism as responses to existential concerns within a predominantly overbearing neoliberal cultural environment. Subject of much continued critical debate, *American Psycho* is still considered by many critics a valid moralistic critique of a monstrous consumer society gone too far and a wholly immoral and irredeemably

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[152] Sonia Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction: Writing between High and Low Culture* (London: Continuum, 2011); *Bret Easton Ellis: American Psycho, Glamorama, Lunar Park,* ed. by Naomi Mandel (London: Continuum, 2010); Georgina Colby, *Bret Easton Ellis: Underwriting the Contemporary* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
[153] Mandel, *Bret Easton Ellis,* p. 3.

sordid text. As demonstrated in Chapter One, the novel challenges the artistic and fictive engagement with the concept of transgression, making apparent the futility of affirmative protrusions of violence and misdemeanour in an age dominated by the excess of a seemingly insurmountable neoliberal cultural logic.

Chapter One, 'The Failure to Transgress: Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), Violence and the Critique of Neoliberal Capitalism', interrogates the (in)effectiveness of existing paradigms of transgression and violence within *American Psycho* (1991). Throughout this chapter, I draw on Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* and Žižek's work on violence to argue that we presently live in a world predicated on the perverse logic of neoliberal control that suffocates all rational political and economic alternatives. In response, I posit that the 'value' of Ellis's most controversial text resides less in its depiction of a valid alternative or rebellion, but in the problematic engagement with transgressive desire that ultimately undermines a cultural narrative of inescapable neoliberal corporatism and consumerism. I assert that for violence in the novel to be purposeful and truly transgressive, it must incite a tangible disturbance or cross the boundary of acceptability. To this end, Bateman's rapacious and mundane violence demonstrates the extent to which acting out within an unflinching, capitalist realist cultural environment cannot be considered transgressive. Rather than seeking to exceed or affirm a (non-existent) external limit through violent excess, the notion of self-destruction and the complete absence of self from a capitalist realist scenario, relays the subversive current within the novel characterised in the unflinching portrayal of monstrous capitalism and the neoliberal subject.

Ellis's *American Psycho* brings into question the value and role of literary fantasies of violence as symptomatic of, and respondent to, capitalism and cultural/subjective despair. The subject of Chapter Two, the American author Chuck Palahniuk also responds to similar scenes of existential discontent and cultural abjection in his attempts to numb or alleviate the pain felt by his characters within postmodern and neoliberal western societies through shock and satire.[154] Often associated with Ellis, owing to his unflinching critique of late-twentieth and early twenty-first century culture and society, Palahniuk is one of the most prolific, influential

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[154] *Chuck Palahniuk: Fight Club, Invisible Monsters, Choke,* ed. by Francisco Collado-Rodriguez (London: Continuum, 2013); *Sacred and Immoral: On the Writings of Chuck Palahniuk,* ed. by Jeffrey A. Sartain (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009); *Stirrings Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature,* ed. by Erik M. Grayson, 2:2 (2005).

and recognisable authors working in the field of transgressive fiction today. Over two decades, Palahniuk's fictions have polarised popular and critical opinion as readers are markedly respondent to or repulsed by an outrageous engagement with grotesque and transgressive themes of violence, sex and death that convey very serious concerns related to the moral and ethical condition and well-being of the postmodern and neoliberal subject. As Annesley notes, Palahniuk's fictions are characterised by their confrontation with and 'emphasis on the extreme, the marginal, and the violent' and provocatively explore alternatives to the contemporary mainstream based on an affirmative, sometimes horrific and wholly transgressive communal experience.[155] Throughout *Fight Club* (1996)*, Invisible Monsters* (1999), *Choke* (1999) and *Haunted* (2005), for example, Palahniuk's characters come together in the face of adversity, discontent and cultural cynicism to form subversive groups who deploy the experience of self-inflicted pain, transgression and even death as an insubordinate means of resisting and negating social rules. Of Palahniuk's extensive catalogue of works, *Fight Club* and *Haunted* bookend the first decade of his literary career and propose divergent critical perspectives on some of the most prominent and recurring themes in his work, namely, violence, transgression and community. In both, an ethics of self-destruction and an engagement with extreme existential and cultural discontent are validated in the rejection of postmodern and neoliberal culture. Furthermore, these two fictions extend the critique of neoliberal society and the environment of capitalist realism that is evident in Ellis by presenting extreme, outsider communities as abstract models for a rebellious society fighting against the alienating hegemonic logic of late-capitalism and cultural postmodernism.

Chapter Two, 'Destruction and Affirmation in the Extreme Communities of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) and *Haunted* (2005)', focuses on Palahniuk's early and mid-career satiric fictions and their cynical and nihilistic protagonists, who turn to community and death in response to existential and societal dissatisfaction. Throughout this chapter, I draw from the critical works of Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, who each cite the experience and confrontation of death as the cornerstone for a new model of society. In response, I read the confrontation with death (literal and abstract) in Palahniuk's fictions as a way of facing up to and resisting a passive culture that obfuscates the latent existential trauma inhibiting the characters of the novels.

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[155] Annesley, *Blank Fictions,* p. 1.

Throughout, I argue that communities in *Fight Club* and *Haunted* are bonded together in a state of hopelessness and respond to their collective frustration through a transgressive desire for ulteriority, pathology and destruction. Whilst Palahniuk's retreating protagonists do not necessarily seek suicidal means of destruction, the communities they establish present the possibility of self-destruction as a catalyst for a more authentic life. Through the advent of the transgressive community, the subject(s) of the texts attempt to resist neoliberal hegemony and cultural postmodernism through a more meaningful – and ultimately problematic – relationship with violence and mortality.

Chapters One and Two establish fantasies of self-destruction as a meaningful topic of enquiry or alternative to neoliberal hegemony, however, a pessimistic conceit becomes apparent as Ellis and Palahniuk fail to articulate a viable alternative. Chapters Three and Four more explicitly demonstrate the extent to which any hopeful or positivist reading of such radical transgressive fantasies becomes problematic. Here, literary transgression, nihilism and self-destruction are negating and speculative procedures that seek to take the subject/community out of their unsavoury predicament altogether. This is sought in Ballard and Ligotti's fiction through a complete ontological change in attitudes, an embrace of pathology, of horror and a perverse reapplication/reformation of the desire to escape that evidences the darker philosophical and ethical implications of literary fantasies of self-destruction.

The third author studied here is one of Britain's best known modern writers and, until his death in 2009, was a prolific writer of urban (and suburban) dystopias, science fiction and, as I later describe, anarchic transgressive fictions. Ballard's oeuvre reads as an ever-shifting, speculative mediation on violence and psychopathology in response to an increasingly streamlined and technology-saturated postmodern world. As numerous studies have argued, J. G. Ballard was an innovator of dystopian and psychopathological transgressive fictions whose influence on the development of identifiably transgressive fictions in the mid-to-late twentieth century cannot be understated.[156] Moreover, his writings presided over a shift from literary avant-gardism, experimentation and surrealism to narratives of sexual deviancy, eroticism

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[156] Andrezj Gasiorek, *J. G. Ballard* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); *J. G. Ballard: Contemporary Critical Perspectives,* ed. by Jeannette Baxter (London: Continuum, 2009a); Samuel Francis, *The Psychological Fictions of J. G. Ballard* (London: Continuum, 2013).

and violence in the 70s and 80s. Many of Ballard's most recognisable works, such as *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) and *Crash* (1973), are discernible aesthetic and thematic influences on Ellis, Palahniuk and Thomas Ligotti's work, although it is his later fictions that I will be examining. *Super-Cannes* (2000) and *Millennium People* (2003), particularly, are representative of a distinctive phase in Ballard's literary career that is characterised by its pessimistic and even fearful engagement with late capitalism and accelerated neoliberalism. Moreover, both are notable in their engagement with psychopathology and self-destruction, as they explore the viability and possibility of an alternative to a depressing contemporary cultural landscape.

Super-Cannes and *Millennium People* present the dystopian effect of accelerated neoliberalism against both the individual and society. Both fictions add gravitas to the claim that outward displays of transgression and violence (that seek to reaffirm or validate the subject) fail to provide a capable framework for a resistant alternative. Instead, each presents a turn towards psychopathology and nihilism in response to socio-political and existential frustration and concern. In these novels, desire and violence assume precedence over moral or politically subversive efforts as characters seek to re-assert themselves within accelerated, neoliberal environments. In *Super-Cannes* Ballard examines the extent to which desire and transgression are transposed into the system and into the labour process itself as subjects, through the (ab)use of their own bodies and reconditioning of their own subjectivity, go to disturbing extremes to integrate themselves into the fluxes and apparatus of the Eden-Olympia commune. In doing so, the novel becomes a provocative examination of the terminal and pathological effects of transgression within an accelerationist socio-cultural environment. Throughout *Millennium People,* Ballard examines the extent to which supposedly viable methods of resistance fail to challenge (and even become co-opted by) the very powers they seek to resist. In a turn from anarchy and revolution to nihilism and self-destruction, Ballard's novels seem to reinforce the pessimistic conceit that there is no escape or alternative from a capitalist-realist cultural environment. Indeed, both novels demonstrate that while psychopathology and self-destruction motivate a subject out of their existential inertia, outward displays and fantasies of transgressive action or desire, paradoxically, often integrate an individual within the system.

Chapter Three, 'Complicity, Resistance and Terminal Transgression in J. G. Ballard's *Super-Cannes* (2000) and *Millennium People* (2003)', explores the extent to which rebellious, outsider individuals fail to undermine or challenge neoliberal cultural and political limits. In this chapter, the conversion of a rebellious outsider (who seeks to re-establish a moral code within a perverse and non-compliant culture) to a complicit agent within the dynamic of the neoliberal and hyper-capitalist environments described within the texts, highlights the sense of dystopian pessimism that inflicts these fictions. Through close readings of *Super-Cannes* and *Millennium People,* this chapter charts the extent to which freedom, resistance and transgression manifest in the form of a spiteful psychopathology (be it of accelerationism and/or nihilism) are demonstrably problematic. Ballard's late fictions posit the tension between destructive resistance and a cynical complicity towards the acceleration of damaging socio-cultural and political practices. In a pessimistic conceit, (self-)destruction becomes the only response to the absurd existential and cultural predicament befalling the protagonists. As Chapter Three proposes, nihilistic and self-destructive violence once again problematises the conception of transgression as a valid form of resistance. In *Millennium People* and *Super-Cannes*, the language of resistance and transgression becomes complicit in the perverse acceleration of deleterious neoliberal utopias. Describing scenes where resistance and nihilism fail to enact a radical and viable change in circumstances, what is left for Ballard's characters is a pessimistic choice between spiteful self-destruction and/or a masochistic reinvestment of oneself into a system that cannot otherwise be resisted.

The final author under sustained critical examination here is the American short fiction writer Thomas Ligotti. Despite a prolific career as a cult writer within weird and horror fiction circles, Ligotti remains somewhat obscure to mainstream readerships, although he is increasingly acclaimed within wider literary circles as one of the pre-eminent stylists of recent decades.[157] As a writer of predominantly genre horror short fiction, Ligotti might seem an anomalous subject alongside the likes of Ballard, Ellis and Palahniuk. This assumption, nonetheless, does not reflect the intricacies of Ligotti's philosophically potent engagement with the ethics of horror, existential philosophy and his novel approach to the reading of contemporary neoliberal culture

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[157] See: *The Thomas Ligotti Reader: Essays and Explorations,* ed. by Darrell Schweitzer (Holicong: Wildside Press, 2003a); Thacker, *Tentacles Longer Than Night*; 'Thomas Ligotti: The Escape From Life' in S. T. Joshi, *The Modern Weird Tale: A Critique of Horror Fiction* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2001), pp. 243–257.

and society. The inclusion of Ligotti in this study of self-destruction in transgressive fiction allows for an even more speculative investigation of the ethics and possibilities of transgression than is afforded in studies of other authors. While Ligotti offers no pretensions towards a viable solution or alternative to the existential and material concerns that befall his characters (the very same concerns posed in the fiction of Ellis, Palahniuk and Ballard), Ligotti's work explores the possibility of an imaginative form of escape. As such, Ligotti's fiction speculatively explores the literary and philosophical value of a total escape *into* horror that holds no optimistic allusions or pretensions towards the affirmation of a transgressing subject.

My Work is Not Yet Done (2002) marks Ligotti's most sustained and antagonistic engagement with violence, suicide, existential pessimism and horror within a uniquely imaginative literary revision of the neoliberal/corporate setting. Here, and in other recognisably 'corporate' horror stories in *Teatro Grottesco* (2008), the author uses the 'shadowy and incomprehensible' world of work as a powerful metaphor for the existential malaise and horror of wider existence. Furthermore, Ligotti rehearses literary scenes of ontological and corporeal self-destruction and suicide in lieu of any other viable, realistic alternative to, or escape from, the unfortunate predicament of human existence. While less explicit in his critique of the material realities under neoliberalism than Ellis, Palahniuk and Ballard, the importance of reading the works featured in *My Work is Not Yet Done* and *Teatro Grottesco* is qualified by their uncompromising and pessimistic explorations of self-destruction as the logical conclusion to the existential concerns raised in the fictions of the previous authors. As will be addressed in this thesis, Ligotti's transgressive short stories, such as 'The Clown Puppet', 'My Case for Retributive Action', 'The Town Manager' and 'My Work is Not Yet Done', propose a fatalistic encounter with horror and self-destruction as a means of negating the dehumanising and negative effects of existence within a thoroughly nightmarish world.

Through an extended study of *My Work is Not Yet Done* (2002) and other short fictions, such as 'The Clown Puppet' and 'Sideshow, and Other Stories', Chapter Four, 'Transgression and Pessimism in Thomas Ligotti's Workplace Horrors', examines how fantasies of self-destructive fatalism become a means of pursuing the desire for transgression in an otherwise hopeless world. In response to similar themes of existential despair and neoliberal and corporate horror prevalent in previous chapters,

Ligotti's work foregoes the affirmationist vertical movement (or subversion of values) typical of transgressive fiction for an altogether more disturbing shift towards the liminal. In Ligotti's short fiction ontological paradigms and dichotomies are irredeemably and irrevocably negated or skewed. Throughout *Teatro Grottesco* and *My Work is Not Yet Done*, characters confront life's menagerie of horrors (both existential and the consequence of capitalist hegemony) and explore responses to the perverse uselessness of labour and expenditure in the contemporary world. Throughout this chapter, and in view of the works of thinkers such as Schopenhauer, Levinas and Fisher, I posit that Ligotti's philosophical horror fictions and their pessimistic scenes of moral corruption, supernatural dread and subjective uncertainty strike a chord in a contemporary world that has otherwise exhausted all belief in a viable alternative to the present situation. Unlike in more traditionally recognised 'transgressive' fictions, Ligotti's work does not simply stage the identity and society-forming tensions at a supposed boundary between the real-world and its weird or carnivalesque other, nor does it present violence, pathology and deviance as beyond the limits of what is deemed cultural and ethically acceptable. Instead, his fictions imaginatively write away these lines in an act of dissident repudiation. Ultimately, where transgression typically aims to re-establish (a subverted) value or order, Ligotti's work obfuscates these values entirely and pessimistically suggests there is no return from the existential despair that his characters must contend with – except perhaps through a transgressive and eschatological relinquishment of life itself.

In *The World as Will and Representation,* Arthur Schopenhauer argues that it is the role of art 'to afford us temporary relief from the pain caused by […] our desire, our self-presence, and our cognition'.[158] This sentiment is replicated throughout the works of Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti, who each through their novels seeks to afford the reader some respite from or better understanding of the traumatic and disconcerting concerns related to the very task of existence in contemporary and postmodern neoliberal societies. Their response centres on the advent and exploration of self-destruction as a means of crossing and indeed negating limits of what is acceptable and even possible in an era characterised by a vehement lack of affective or realistic alternative or change. My four author studies culminate in the presentation of a clear and multifaceted literary examination of the status and of the representation

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[158] Bruhm, 'Anchors Away!', p. 4.

of self-destruction in contemporary transgressive fiction. Throughout, self-destruction is approached in terms that are prominent in the critical literary study of neoliberalism and postmodernism, satire, Gothic and horror, and transgression, situating self-destruction as a potent literary concern within each of these fields. Ultimately, this thesis applies a speculative critical framework in the consideration of self-destruction as a philosophically conscientious and inventive literary discourse that responds to and violates/transgresses the postmodern or neoliberal scenario of capitalist realism/absolutism diagnosed by the likes of Fisher, Žižek, Berardi and others. By doing so, this thesis contributes to critical fields in contemporary Anglo-American fiction, most notably, by establishing that in their engagement with self-destruction and self-destructive tropes, Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti emerge as key writers who forward a crucial rethinking of current transgressive paradigms in literature, demonstrating the underlying persistence of the much-contested transgressive mode. In so doing, I reveal new opportunities for radical refusal, disobedience and expression in fictions since the early 1990s attributable to the artistic engagement with scenes of corporeal and metaphysical self-destruction as a response to, or more pessimistically, as temporary relief from, the pain and discontent attributable to existential and socio-political concerns.

Chapter One — The Failure to Transgress: Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), Violence and the Critique of Neoliberal Capitalism[1]

Reading *American Psycho* Critically

American Psycho (1991) was the American author Bret Easton Ellis's third published novel, following his breakthrough novel, *Less Than Zero* (1985), and *The Rules of Attraction* (1987).[2] Notorious for its graphic content and frightening in its supposedly morally vacuous, blank and nihilistic values, the novel tracks the events and psychological collapse of a wealthy Wall Street financier, Patrick Bateman, throughout the late 1980s. In this chapter, I interrogate the (in)effectiveness of existing paradigms of violence within Ellis's most controversial novel. My point is to demonstrate that *American Psycho* prefaces a wider literary engagement with the limits of transgressive acts of destruction, and a shift in transgressive literature towards a tentative language of self-destruction implied within the fiction. Both, through a corporeal and ontological engagement with destruction, the novel undermines predominant cultural discourses related to modern US culture's compulsive need to spend/expend and consume to preserve the motions and façade of neoliberal capitalism. Instead, I propose in this chapter that the failure of violence actually emerges as a means to explore the possibility of an escape, or alternative to, a violent and insidious hegemonic order that exhorts, co-opts and defangs horror and transgression as a subversive critical register.

Throughout *American Psycho,* horror, violence, existential nihilism and transgression emerge as the protagonist attempts to remediate his latent aimlessness and antipathy within an anesthetized, postmodern, neoliberal environment. It is my

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[1] This chapter builds on and develops some ideas and material which I had published in the following essay: Rachid M'Rabty, '"This is how Life presents itself. This is what being Patrick means" – Revisiting Violence in *American Psycho*', *The Dark Arts Journal* 1:1 (2016), 23–33 <https://thedarkartsjournal.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/the-dark-arts-journal-1-1.pdf> [accessed 2 March 2019].
[2] Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage, 1991); Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985); Bret Easton Ellis, *Imperial Bedrooms* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

contention that violence, grotesque and indefensible activities in the novel, which tend towards an other (or victim) are overcome by failure. The literary representation of violence is marked by an inability to shake or shock the offending literary subject from their inertia, and the failure to transgress, to which I refer, relays my own cynical rebuttal of existing paradigms of (violent) transgression as evinced in late-twentieth century fictions. Rather than being an unabashedly nihilistic and ethically redundant text, Ellis's novel signals the need to look beyond the familiar tropes of outwardly directed transgression (which seeks to reaffirm or elevate a subject). The turn to violence in *American Psycho* prefaces the deadlock at the heart of the transgressive gesture itself. Namely, how can the system can ever be truly disrupted when it controls the means by which one would seek to cause disruption. Accusations of virulent and absolutist nihilism have followed the novel since publication, however, the embrace of the negative pushes in a more radical critical direction. To forego the affirmative and embrace the subversive becomes the only truly transgressive option in the wake of the infectiously degenerative and abusive neoliberal, cultural ontology that casts its shadow over all (of Bateman's) activities and the cultural, political and subjective economies present in the novel.

As a text which self-consciously chases the negative, both in terms of its entropic violence, its blank and nihilistic aesthetic and its ontologically subversive, satirical outlook, *American Psycho* reads as a diagnostic catalogue of the critical themes registered throughout this thesis. Throughout the novel, neoliberal capitalism is held to stark account as a terrifying entity that dislocates positivism and affirmation into its own perverse networks and logic, suffocating viable and 'radical' alternatives in the process. Similarly, the notion of violence and transgression (as both a means to enact change, alleviate or incite some form of existential feeling) is explored throughout and ultimately deemed ineffective as the edict 'This is not an Exit' haunts the narrative. Instead, the possibility of self-destruction, a concept both feared and desired in the text, looms for the protagonist as he struggles to assimilate his innate desire for destruction within his meaningless existence.

This chapter draws on the thought of Mark Fisher, Franco Berardi and Slavoj Žižek, who argue that as, subjects of neoliberal capitalism, we are increasingly suffocated of all political, economic and revolutionary alternative. Resonating throughout this chapter, and indeed this thesis, is Fisher's seminal notion of capitalist

realism, which proclaims there is no escape from capitalism because it forms the ontological and metaphysical – as well as material – basis for all thought and experience in contemporary society. As becomes evident, Ellis's novel shares this conceit and posits that the controversial, transgressive acts depicted represent a problematic and cynical notion which a number of modern literary and cultural critics (particularly those working in the fields of horror and postmodern Gothic) have noted. Namely, transgressive desire and fantasies of the kind exhibited throughout *American Psycho* are inherently limited as affective and emotive affirmative responses, or in their potential to undermine a cultural narrative of rampant and violent consumerism in which subjects themselves are always, already an object to be consumed and (ab)used. For violence in this novel, and indeed other novels that seek to disrupt and even dismember moral and ontological givens, to be truly transgressive (and by this, I mean to *really* cross a limit of some kind) it must incite a tangible disturbance that negates the neoliberal capitalist worldview altogether. It must operate on a wholly separate level, seeking not affirmation or gratification beyond the nihilistic and violent act, but instead a complete dismantling of oneself as a product of neoliberal capital. To this end, I assert that Bateman's often mundane and unsatisfying violence demonstrates that his acting out within an unflinching capitalist realist cultural environment cannot be considered truly transgressive. This highlights the limits of subjective and affective violence in the narrative. Rather than seeking to exceed or affirm a (non-existent) external limit through violent and consumptive excess, the notion of self-destruction and the complete, eschatological untangling of oneself from the networks of neoliberal cultural control presented in *American Psycho,* better relates the subversive current of Ellis's novel.

Patrick Bateman's grotesque violence and transgressions mark a cynical and melancholic reaction to the destruction of the subject levied by a postmodern, nightmarish and all-consuming neoliberal culture and economy. Moreover, throughout the text, Bateman's violent and sexual assaults, mutilations and slaughters bring into light and amplify the unseen workings of the exploitative state and cultural apparatus, whilst also demonstrating the extent of the neoliberal subject's nihilistic corrosion of subjectivity. The impact of violence in this erosion of subjectivity is key to understanding the self-destructive edge to Bateman's activities that undermine the ideological and operational activities of the financially obsessed society against which

he identifies himself. Violence, here, operates on multiple levels, but it is Bateman's violence which pushes the boundaries of acceptability and the taboo, and in so doing delineates an excess that challenges a subject's mental and/or physical position within postmodern, capitalist culture and economy.

Written in 1991, and explicitly engaged with the spectral and totalizing nature of neoliberal capitalism and consumer-culture (which have since become ever-more pronounced and entrenched), Ellis's novel neatly opens this study of 'contemporary' fiction. In the contemporary, capitalist world, terror, a staple of the Gothic tradition, is not simply a popular aesthetic of blood and guts, murder and monsters. Although these tropes significantly make apparent and undermine or annihilate rational and moralistic understandings of contemporary culture and society, *American Psycho* exhibits a much more nuanced approach in its satirisation and critique of postmodernity. *American Psycho* becomes a productive register of contemporary ire, angst and horror as the cultural and economic pressures and desires lead to bloody acts of transgression that expose the meaninglessness of the ontological fabric of society. As I will examine through the case of Patrick Bateman, the mask of sanity that covers postmodern reality slips to reveal a suffocating violence within the system itself that incites a crisis of subjectivity with significant and nihilistic repercussions.

Whether the disturbingly visceral instances of violence in the text actually take place or are an elaborate pathological fantasy is not the issue. Instead, I read the narrative as a violent satire that threatens the 'logical' and unassailable integrity and position of global capitalism and the subject(s) who experience it. Throughout this chapter, I deem that Ellis's protagonist fails to properly act on the overbearing sense of cynicism and dread conveyed throughout the narrative by means of self-destruction and/or an aversion of reality (the neoliberal-capitalist status quo, or state of capitalist realism). Instead, whilst Bateman's narrative reveals the inherent negative logic of capitalism and the meaninglessness of reality, violent activity throughout the novel repeatedly struggles to undermine or transgress the real system of global capitalism. In so doing, it highlights the need to unhinge oneself from the aesthetic-realism of financially obsessed society. Due to the inexorable pressures of capitalism's ominous grip on Bateman, he is unable to fully achieve this need. For all of its concern with transgression and existential angst, *American Psycho* displays an exposition of nihilism against the seemingly commonplace systems of cultural and social control

and repression. It has been argued that nihilism, specifically 'active' nihilism relates to a necessarily subversive energy working against semblance to expose the 'illusions,' 'lies,' and imaginary formations of cultural reality.[3] After the realisation that the subject's outlook and reality is dictated by an increasingly terrifying logic of capital, a means of escape must be found in the destruction of the system as embodied within oneself. This is a conclusion which Bateman, like his forerunner Clay in *Less Than Zero,* however, fails to deliver on, instead succumbing to passivity and the *will not to will,* rather than a *will to nothingness*.[4]

The novel itself begins with the foreboding warning to its reader to 'ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE', as Patrick Bateman and his close friend, Timothy Price, dismissively count the number of homeless in the streets whilst discussing their increasingly (and obscene) affluence.[5] This scene sets the tone for a novel in which the reality is obfuscated by the horror and violence that capitalism tolls on Bateman's epistemological experience of reality, as he is responsive only to the shiny surface objects of consumerism that foretell of capitalism's inescapable imprint on the closed and suffering world around him. *American Psycho* is thus a prime example of an uncomfortable contemporary novel dominated by the interaction between capitalism and violence. It is also a work of fiction that engages in a powerful – although often contested – critique of a cannibalistic consumer society gone too far and is widely heralded as a satire of cultural norms, violence and transgression itself in an age dominated by the excesses of capitalism. In its early years, much of *American Psycho'*s negative reception and scandalous reputation stemmed from a critical and moral condemnation of the numerous scenes of excessive and grotesque violence committed by Bateman. This negative reception culminated in a raft of well-respected literary critics and journalists labelling the novel 'junk', while others called it a how-to guide for the torture of women and scathing reviews called for the public to 'snuff this book'.[6] Even when critics 'defended' the novel, or at least Ellis's right to have written it, few offered any ringing endorsement of Ellis's skill as a writer or of his 'monstrous

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[3] Alenka Zupancic, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two* (Boston: MIT Press, 2003), p. 63.
[4] Zupancic, p. 64.
[5] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 3.
[6] Roger Rosenblatt, 'Snuff this Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away With Murder?' *New York Times*, (16 December 1990).

thesis'.[7] I will not burden the reader with a detailed survey of the critical reception or recall the fraught history of the novel's reception in the media and popular culture, as much of this ground has been extensively covered in seminal studies of the novel, such as those by Julian Murphet, and Sonia Baelo-Allué.[8] Instead, I focus on the shift form critical scorn to appreciation and endorsement of Ellis's notorious novel as relates to the multifaceted depiction of violence in the text. In so doing, I will present the reader with a short critical guide to readings of violence and transgression within the novel, positioning my own readings as a necessary response to some of the unanswered or fraught questions that remain in the critical discourse around this text.

The critical recuperation of the novel did not take long to establish itself following the initial backlash from reviewers and the mainstream media.[9] Indeed, despite the initial controversies and indignation, *American Psycho* has since become assimilated into contemporary culture and the popular consciousness owing to its perceived literary petulance and frightening and 'uncompromising face off with [its] age'.[10] As early as 1993, Elizabeth Young authored the first noteworthy literary study of *American Psycho.* Reading beyond the novel's apparent misogynistic violent exhibitionism, Young read Ellis against contemporary (late 80s, early 90s) socio-political contexts, highlighting the valid attempted critique which his novel posed.[11] Murphet, too, posits that Ellis's subversive and satirical take on the socio-political climate of the late-twentieth century demonstrates a 'nihilistic contempt' rarely matched in contemporary works.[12] As a result of these pieces of criticism, the novel's value as a comment on American politics, economy and culture soon became central to the critical appreciation of Ellis's controversial, early fiction. Moving beyond the limited historicist reading of the novel, however, I outline a consensus that has since developed pertaining to the wider literary and philosophical merit of the novel. In particular, I examine the extent to which the violence that is synonymous with the novel

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[7] Norman Mailer, 'Children of the Pied Piper: A Review of American Psycho', *Vanity Fair* (Fall 1991), 154–59; Fay Weldon, 'An Honest American Psycho, with Bret Easton Ellis: Fay Weldon on why we can't cope with Ellis's new novel', *The Guardian* (April 1991), p. 21.

[8] Julian Murphet, *Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho: A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2002); Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction*.

[9] Carla Freccero, 'Historical Violence, Censorship and the Serial Killer. The Case of American Psycho.' *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism*, 27:2 (1997), 44–58.

[10] Irvine Welsh, 'Irvine Welsh – American Psycho is a Modern Classic', *The Guardian Online* (10 January 2015) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/10/american-psycho-bret-easton-ellis-irvine-welsh> [accessed 8 August 2015].

[11] Young, *Shopping in Space.*

[12] Murphet, *American Psycho,* pp. 22; 21.

functions or fails as a critical register for the cultural and subjective concerns raised within its pages.

Marco Abel, in *Violent Affect,* argues the need to take images of violence on their own merit, as a means to impart a specific, irrational or unassimilable affect in the reader. Against readings that seek to transform violence into something otherwise unpresentable, or that attempt to re-appropriate violence for moralistic purposes, Abel sees violence as an artistic device utilised to create an affect or action that itself deserves full recognition. In so doing, the critic contends that in the form of mediation and critique a violence is done to the novel, as it eradicates the affective intensity of compositional tropes of boredom, violence and repetition that are central to the novel.[13] Abel makes a valid point here, as too much critical attention and energy have been spent trying to understand or write away and turn the violence of Bateman into something more "meaningful" (or conventional). For the most part, I am obliged to agree with Abel. To escape from, or mediate violence – more so, to control and shape violence within the work of art into a more acceptable moral framework – is largely problematic as it relies on a convention or agenda to assimilate violence in terms of right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable, normative and other. Indeed, it is my view that the violence and transgressive elements of *American Psycho* may benefit from a reading that presents them as constitutive of their own subversive, counter-intuitive, counter-subjective and ultimately horrific logic. Mine is thus a reading of the novel's violence which (however implausible this may be) resists and reviews the assimilation of violence into the abstract network of affirmations, accumulations, exchanges and values that sustain the primacy of the neoliberal capitalist cultural zeitgeist.

Drawing attention to the castrating effect of abstract capitalism and excess and the tension between violence, work and ethics, for the critic James R. Giles, *American Psycho* reflects the imbalanced state of work and violence and exposes an effective, shocking and politicized mode of critique in Ellis's 'evocations of violence in America's saturated culture'.[14] Similarly, Mandel, reacting to contemporary literature's predisposition toward themes of destruction, violence and extremity as a means of

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[13] Marco Abel, *Violent Affect: Literature, Cinema and Critique after Representation* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), p. 39.

[14] James R. Giles, '"I Hope You Didn't Go into Raw Space Without Me": Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*', *The Spaces of Violence* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 160–174 (p. 174).

reacting to globalized capitalist concerns, constructs a reading of *American Psycho* that extends the satire of US culture and economy to a critique of modern ethics, subjectivity and agency more generally. Citing various Sadean and Masochistic tropes in *American Psycho*, Mandel foregrounds transgressive extremity (in the novel) as a 'productive response to [and undermining of] formations of power in a violent world'.[15] That the violence throughout the novel directly coincides with the tropes and trivialities of neoliberal capitalism cannot be easily dismissed in the pursuit of a purely affective or abstract reading of the text. Nor can the reader escape *American Psycho*'s satirical take on neoliberal capitalism in the late-twentieth century.

The centrality of violence in the novel's vociferous attempt at undermining late capitalism is, as Annesley confirms, paramount as Ellis takes aim against a society in which materiality and hyperreality are entwined to the detriment of the individual.[16] Annesley's productive readings of the impact of consumerism in the violence, the blank affect and the dehumanised bodies throughout the novel, however, end by claiming that Ellis contradictorily reinforces the status quo through the mimesis of the very processes of consumptive consumerism being criticised. Such a conclusion pre-empts the contention that I respond to in the second half of this chapter. Namely, that if negative aesthetics and tropes fail to delineate a coherent mode of critique as it further objectifies and commodifies transgression, are these tropes at all redeemable as radical, unsettling or profane literary devices? To answer such a question, I contend that *American Psycho* is a novel which registers multiple violences that disrupt and transgress convention at socio-political, literal and metaphorical levels. The novel registers the violence wrought on subjectivity through the 'deadening impact of commercialisation' and cultural postmodernism, as Annesley correctly cites.[17] Furthermore, it alludes towards more nihilistic forms of violence enacted by subject(s) themselves to impart or explore an alternative ethical code, or indeed, the negation or escape from one.

American Psycho's sardonic association of consumerism and the capitalist imperative to 'consume', in all its forms, has invariably led to numerous readings since Annesley which have inferred a damning critique of the relationship between the

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[15] Naomi Mandel, 'Right Here in Nowheres: *American Psycho* and Violence's Critique', *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme,* 9–19 (pp. 13; 10).
[16] Annesley, *Blank Fictions*, pp. 8; 20.
[17] Annesley, *Blank Fiction,* p. 37.

violence of capitalism and violent psychopathology. While my own inclination is to pay less explicit inference to the trope of the serial killer (instead I make a point of reading the killings as no less important than other transgressions Bateman engages in), a brief outline of these arguments proves useful in understanding the tensions between subject and culture in the novel. Indeed, the serial-killer motif, for Carla Freccero, Philip L. Simpson and Baelo-Allué, literalizes the rampant and terrifying ideology of Bateman's late-twentieth century cultural and political moment.[18] These critics consider the novel as a raucous, postmodern narrative that violates the most basic societal assumptions about literary/artistic propriety and decorum (Freccero), and morality (Simpson), and cite the novel's indictment of the complicity of neoliberal hegemony in the production of violence and social disorder (Baelo-Allué). The serial-killer motif, then, establishes murderous activity, for the offending subject at least, as an appropriate – if somewhat pathological – response to otherwise unassailable feelings of social alienation, inertia and insecurity. Indeed, Berardi as I will later examine, pushes a similar conclusion in his provocative study of contemporary mass murder as a symptom of the failures of neoliberalism.[19] While such readings risk redeeming the serial-killer of culpability, positing the serial-killer/cannibal (the most ardent consumer) as 'an extension of his immersion in the consumerist system', or as 'freaks of culture', for these critics, the novel's refusal to condemn his actions constitutes a damning denunciation of Bateman's guiding moral and cultural coordinates.[20]

The relationship between serial-killing and consumption plays into a sometimes-narrow reading of bodies as the objects of capitalism, which often bypass deeper and more subjective and existential questions raised within the novel impacting beyond the realm of neoliberal and capitalist praxis. The serial attacks on bodies and by extension society and its moral standards may at first appear gratuitous and repulsive, however, they also function 'as a grotesque extension of the [unseen] violence inflicted on the marginalized' and also in a self-destructive manner which undermines the moral and ethical standards (or their lack thereof) and the obscene

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[18] Philip L. Simpson, *Psycho Paths: Tracking the Serial Killer through Contemporary American Film and Fiction* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2000); Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction*, p. 95.

[19] Berardi, *Heroes.*

[20] Sonia Baelo-Allué, 'Serial Murders, Serial Consumerism: Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991)' *Miscelanea: A Journal of English and American Studies,* 26 (2002), 71–90 (p. 88); Annalee Newitz, *Pretend We're Dead: Capitalist Monsters in American Pop Culture,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 9.

ideology of the novel's monstrous perpetrator.[21] Such readings propose that serial killing throughout the novel is the problematic extension of the everyday violence of capitalism which uses and destroys bodies and commodities in an incessant and inhumane cycle of abject consumption. Moreover, readings of the serial-killer trope in *American Psycho* often tend to suggest a moral or ethical economy at work in the novel which centres on a distinguishable sense of right and wrong that forces the reader to consider Bateman's actions as morally reprehensible acts of violent wrongdoing – a distinction that I argue is fraught as *American Psycho* nihilistically undermines the very parameters of the acceptable and the unacceptable. Instead, throughout the novel a melancholic emptiness is experienced by Bateman that alludes towards the wider condition of frustration inherent in subjective interactions with postmodern society more generally. In this regard, Bateman's violence can be productively understood as the pursuit and/or desire for subjective coherence that is undermined by postmodernism. Similarly, dark and transgressive aspects of Bateman's character are also the focus for a number of critics who assert that Bateman's exaggerated transgressions reveal the 'quintessentially human draw to the dark, the grotesque and the abject' in response to existential despair and cultural antipathy.[22]

Through an engagement with Sade, Foucault and Bataille, Vartan P. Messier scrutinizes the ways in which sex and violence are depicted in the novel's most explicit passages to encounter how transgression 'operates independently from a normative set of standards', and propose a radical kernel of socio-political dissent and existential affirmation that is, here, made possible through violence.[23] While a progressively disintegrating Bateman finds value(s) in the stabilizing discursive function of consumption, *American Psycho,* as Elana Gomel contends, 'is not "about" violence at all', but about the existential role of horrific affect and the 'sociology of appearance'.[24] Similarly, for Georgina Colby, *American Psycho*, through means of an illicit expression of desire and agency, reclaims radical/cynical expression amidst an inherently repressive culture/society**.** While the subjective violence of Bateman's excessive and

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[21] Dix, *The Contemporary American Novel in Context,* p. 39.

[22] Casey C. Moore, 'We're Not Through Yet: The Patrick Bateman Debate', *The Comparatist,* 36 (2012), p. 244.

[23] Vartan P. Messier, 'Violence, Pornography and Voyeurism as Transgression in Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*', *Atenea,* 24:1 (2004), 73–93 (pp. 92; 74; 82).

[24] Elana Gomel, '"The Soul of this Man is his Clothes": Violence and Fashion in *American* Psycho', in Mandel, *Bret Easton Ellis,* 50–64 (pp. 50, 62).

obscene transgressions proves indicative of the successful realization of the unseen objective violence of capitalism itself, it is precisely this demonstration of obscenity that marks Ellis's successful inner critique of capitalism's ideological hypocrisy and waste.[25] This line of thought suggests that cultural and social antipathy and extremity represent the most dangerous antagonist in the novel. In this way, the novel can be said to undermine the cultural value placed on aesthetics, through an examination of the irrelevance of the literary and entropic depiction of violence as a valid register or vocabulary for existential frustrations or alternatives within the late-capitalist, postmodern cultural epoch.

The differing critical approaches to violence in the novel, so far introduced, exemplify the shifting critical value placed on the literary engagement with transgressive ethics and aesthetics as a means to explore the possibilities of an effective mode of political or ontological alternative. The critical discourse surrounding *American Psycho* seemingly concedes that there is no outside space to which violence may be consigned, nor any retreat from it and as a result 'it makes sense to begin such a critique [of violence] from the site of the body and the violence it inflicts or receives'.[26] In *American Psycho* Bateman follows his own repulsive and morally vacuous ethical accord, which is problematic in itself as this ethical imperative is so tied up with the cultural logic of late capitalism.[27] In Bateman's confrontation with excess and destruction at the limits of both capitalism and coherence (two rather contradictory ontological frameworks which he schizophrenically passes between throughout the novel), Ellis denigrates the role of transgression, violence and agency. In so doing, the characterization of Bateman reveals that agency itself is often a violent – indeed, self-destructive – pursuit which, nevertheless, gambles everything on the radical, liberating potential of violence as an eschatological method.[28]

For some critics Ellis's novel fails to adequately question/challenge the world he describes and *American Psycho* contradictorily reinforces the status quo or fails in its critical intentions. Rather than strengthen the status quo, Ellis's amoral text I argue, reveals the violence inherent in capitalism so that the reader may reassess it critically. Moreover, Ellis's refusal to prescribe authorial judgement or impart a sense of closure

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[25] Colby, *Bret Easton Ellis,* pp. 89; 94.
[26] Mandel, 'Right Here in Nowheres', p. 12.
[27] Mandel, 'Right Here in Nowheres', p. 13.
[28] Mandel, 'Right Here in Nowheres', p. 18.

invites further questioning of the politics and ethics society lives by. It is generally considered that Ellis's controversial novel does not glamorize violence, as there is little gratification or elevation of the horror into something 'more'. Instead, consensus deems that atonal and blank transgression exposes the paradoxical meaninglessness of violence and the capitalist consumptive imperative to further undermine postmodern and late-capitalist cultural systems. While many have dismissed *American Psycho* for its inability to distinguish between the literal and the fantasy of violence, later critics acknowledge that this is, instead, demonstrative of the novel's subversive prowess and critical worth. Thus, *American Psycho* infers that a different approach to violence is necessary.

To read violence as a metaphor or stage for the contestation of some other disputed dialogue or impasse, rather than as an affect or form of realism in itself, is for the likes of Abel, a critical pursuit doomed to failure. I, however, consider this hypothesis too inflexible, particularly concerning a novel like *American Psycho* and indeed other transgressive fictions and 'fictions of self-destruction' examined throughout this thesis. Likewise, to read the violence as solely a frame to better encounter both the material and abstract values and concerns related to neoliberal and postmodern culture is a position that inherently reduces or dismisses valid existential and wider ontological concerns alluded to in the novel. While scorn and antipathy against neoliberal capitalism haunts Ellis's novel, exhibitions of affective transgression operate on multiple levels, irreducible solely as a metaphorical trope or an altogether more self-referential realism. Indeed, Xavier Aldana-Reyes's work on the subject of violent affect in literature and film posits that affective readings can productively coincide with, and elevate, the critical and metaphorical intent of a work of art's critique of capitalist schematics and praxis.[29] This is the hypothesis I apply, as violence throughout the novel is apparent in the destruction wrought by (and the destruction of) Bateman in the operations of neoliberal consumerist society and culture and in the novel's insidious attack against the praxis of moral and ontological coherence. While violence throughout the novel appears unable to overcome dominant culture, the failures of Bateman's ostentatious and outwardly violent destruction, which I now turn to, show that a move *beyond* and rethinking of transgression (and its role within wider society and within the subject themselves) is

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[29] Aldana Reyes, *Horror Film and Affect.*

needed. The sense of terror incited by his (actioned or fantasized) serial killing and consumption reveals the perverse nature of capitalist cultural mechanisms and his reified position within them. Bateman's is a perpetual descent toward nihilistic territories that signal the complete erasure of meaning and politics, as he struggles to resolve the fractures of the culturally dominant system embodied by his behaviours.

No Exit: Violence and the Horror of Capitalism Realism

Horror is that which incites feelings or responses of disgust and fear or dread, and throughout the novel Ellis characterizes capital (via a benign proxy, or in the shape of numerous or incomprehensible guises) as the thing of horror. Capitalist realism is in this sense, a deeply horrific concern since it registers a particular atmosphere wherein terror, desire, trauma and a spectral and pernicious immateriality collide. In this way, the experience of reality under the conditions of postmodern, neoliberal capitalism is established as a horrific ideological fantasy that reaches in and beyond, material and aesthetic reality. From this viewpoint I explore and even placate the monstrous violence of Patrick Bateman as both an integral facet of the capitalist realist scenario and a negative and critical response to it.

In describing 'Gothic postmodernism', Maria Beville outlines how the contemporary novel relates a specifically postmodern loss of reality and loss of 'self' to a particularly dark sense of terror. Patrick Bateman, as many have pointed out, is a symptom of the perverse and violent system he inhabits. More than this, Bateman is the manifestation of the particularly gothic-postmodern terrors of neoliberal capitalism, recognised as a claustrophobic sphere of nightmares predicated on an ideological aesthetic of violence, meaninglessness and fear. Terror permeates throughout *American Psycho,* both above and below the surface of the narrative, 'the cause [of which] is hard to locate', for Bateman, signals the extent to which the death of reality and subjectivity under the repressive system of neoliberal capitalism has a physical and subconscious impact on the subject.[30] The Gothic-postmodern narrative is distinguishable in its retention of an affective, subversive intent to provoke traumatic disturbances. When, in *American Psycho,* Bateman states that 'there is an idea of

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[30] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 221.

Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity', he alludes to the deep-rooted fears and anxieties that undermine ontological (and socio-political) stability and security through its implementation of the spectral, horror and gothic terror. Gothic is a transgressive mode; gothic-postmodernism, however, is a specific modal discourse that channels and synthesises the characteristic transgression of the Gothic mode with the postmodern, cynical denunciation toward authoritarian grand-narratives, repressive social and political structures and formalism. As such, it is an 'exorsive force for the fears, desires and anxieties that plagu[e] society,' where a repressive globalized society predicated on the absolute power of neoliberal capitalism reigns.[31]

Literary representations of violence occupy a problematic position within the logic of radical transgression, particularly in the response to the absolute power of neoliberal capitalism. The role of violence in the operational and metaphysical logic of capitalism has been a potent source of debate for critics for a number of decades. Critics as diverse in their diagnosis and responses as Žižek, Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari, Land and Fisher, for example, consider the violent nature of neoliberal capitalism, and the validity or possibility of a radical response or negation of it. In his notorious work of post-structuralist critique, *The Libidinal Economy,* Jean-François Lyotard argued that structural powers, like capitalism, exploit and re-appropriate our deepest – libidinal – desires into the mechanics of its own hegemonic functioning. In doing so, libidinal desire (less a primarily sexualised drive and more accurately the subject's inherent sense of energy and determination) is transformed to the extent that it is limited, denied and replaced by a nihilistic logic of capitalism. In response, Marxist politics and critique, for Lyotard, is engaged in a pursuit of the affirmative and the transgression of limits and negativity. However, this 'requires [the possibility of] an exteriority beyond the reach of capital' that Lyotard is here sceptical of due to the way in which – through processes of re-coding and stripping everything in existence of all but its 'exchangeability' – capital becomes a limit that cannot be exceeded.[32]

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[31] Beville, *Gothic-Postmodernism,* p. 23.

[32] Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Energumen Capitalism', in #*Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader,* ed. by Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), 163–208 (p. 171).

For Deleuze and Guattari, against whom Lyotard's critique was primarily a response, 'everything is rational in capitalism, except capital or capitalism itself'.[33] In their diagnosis, capital, in the years leading up to those portrayed in Ellis's novel, 'is at such a level of insanity that psychiatry has but one clinical equivalent: the terminal stage'.[34] Sidestepping, for now, the psychoanalytic tropes of their critique, Deleuze and Guattari argued that capitalism has succeeded in creating 'desiring machines' out of people, and rather ominously, the desire it cultivated is fundamentally self-legitimizing and nihilistic. Here, 'monetary flux, the means of production' and the contingencies of capitalist economy replete and are 'inseparable from the phenomenon of desire'.[35] Building on the likes of Deleuze and Guattari and Lyotard's rebuke of Marxist critical optimism, Nick Land argues that Marxist attempts to anticipate the collapse of (or escape from) capitalism by way of some overcoming are practically redundant. In his view, 'the death of capital is less a prophecy than a machine part', owing to the way in which capital – as part of its wider dissemination into all aspects of existence – incorporates and even facilities the reciprocal fantasy of its own collapse.[36] For Land, at the supposed limit of capital, the vestige of 'transcendent identity snaps' and what follows is the reciprocal and resilient, reinforcement of capitalism and reproduction.[37] For Land, then, capitalism is less a coherent, 'totalizable system' than it is 'a convergent unrealizable assault upon a social macropod' or the subject.[38]

Synthesising and building on these kinds of critiques, for Fisher, capitalism has succeeded – to the detriment of the subject and wider population – in positioning itself as 'the only viable political and economic' and indeed cultural system.[39] In so doing, capitalism, aided by a cultural postmodernism, has presided over a shift in psychology – at the deepest level – from 'belief to aesthetics, from engagement to spectatorship'.[40] Patrick Bateman, however, fluctuates as both the archetypal capitalist realist and its obscene other, the prototype psychosocial rebel (who desires something to believe in

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[33] Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattati, 'Capitalism: A Very Special Delirium', in *Hatred of Capitalism: A Semiotext(e) Reader,* ed. by Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 2001), 215–220 (p. 215).
[34] Deleuze and Guattati, 'Capitalism', p. 215.
[35] Deleuze and Guattati, 'Capitalism', p. 219.
[36] Nick Land, 'Making it with Death: Remarks on Thanatos and Desiring-Production', in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings, 1987–2007,* ed. by Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2011), 261–287 (p. 266).
[37] Land, 'Making it with Death', p. 271.
[38] Land, 'Making it with Death', p. 276.
[39] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 2.
[40] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism,* p. 5.

beyond the aesthetic and who seeks to engage, rather than spectate) to the emergent system of capitalism realism taking hold in the late 80s and early 90s. Disconcertingly, Bateman describes his '*need* to engage in […] homicidal behaviour on a massive scale' in terms of a lack of alternative and as the only means by which to express his 'blocked needs'.[41] These needs are those not conventionally accessible or assailable in the capitalist realist system. Moreover, his insatiable desire for the mores of capitalist consumption throughout *American Psycho* leads him to seek experiences beyond the natural, conventional or permitted to seek – and indeed succumb to mental collapse in the failed pursuit of – something other or beyond the unsurmountable limits of capitalist realism.

Mark Fisher offers a poignant diagnosis of the situation and its implications for both societal and individual subjectivity, lamenting that capitalism not only 'seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable' and has 'seeped into the very unconscious,' the real terror lies in the realization that it has subsumed and possessed entire droves of populations with such little effective protestation.[42] In the capitalist realist space of *American Psycho*, the very processes of neoliberalization itself subsume reality, so much so that it appears a realism of its own accord – predicated on the relation between the mechanisms of fictitious capital and the reified, 'non'-subjects like Patrick Bateman and his numerous victims. The term itself, therefore does not only designate the way '[c]apital appears *real to us*: self-evident, obvious, [and] inevitable,' but is also 'sensitive to the increasingly discursive nature of [c]apital, […] which makes it appear merely *realistic'* and efficient.[43] Furthermore, capitalist realism derives its omnilegitimizing power from the parasitic way in which it latches onto cultural/political apparatus, adapts itself and 'subsumes and consumes history'.[44]

While excessive and entropic violence is easily identifiable within the novel as the thing of antagonistic countercultural potential, an insidious, underlying violence is co-opted into the structural apparatus and discourses of capitalism. This is demonstrated when Bateman presents a political agenda outlining a confusingly inconsistent liberal attitude that poses as a radical discourse for an alternative socio-

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[41] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 325.
[42] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism,* p. 5.
[43] Matt Kavanagh, 'Second Nature: American Fiction in the Age of Capitalist Realism' (unpublished doctoral thesis, McGill University: Montreal, 2007), p. 16.
[44] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism,* p. 5.

political and economic model.[45] This scene signifies Bateman's first real engagement with a radical alterity, as he incoherently proposes changes which are detrimental – even fatal – to his employment and lifestyle, such as 'controlling mergers and big corporate takeovers', providing 'food and shelter for the homeless and oppos[ing] racial discrimination', 'equal rights for women', 'curb graphic sex and violence […] everywhere' and to promote 'general social concern and less materialism'.[46] However, the mangled way in which they are proposed highlights a lack of understanding of the effect/implications of such changes and are dismissed by his peers who respond with mystified, 'bemused disbelief' at Bateman's suggestions.[47] As far as his shocked and amused contemporaries are concerned, Bateman's political rant is both scandalous, and wholly unimaginable as an alternative to the current hegemonic situation.

These unattainable policies and changes in attitudes appear (at face value) to threaten the neoliberal social and political agenda, as well as the lifestyle of the financially privileged elite. However, it is the case that such empty political slogans are in fact not alternatives, but instead are the instruments of neoliberal discourse itself: they present the illusion of alternative, which negates a need for proper, transgressive activity whilst obfuscating the underlying issue of repressive capitalist hegemony. It is a demonstration of the power of the neoliberal hegemony that it allows the threat of alternatives to exist and yet they exist in a hollow, empty and toothless way. Furthermore, this scene is ironically recalled throughout the narrative whenever Bateman encounters someone potentially impacted by these concerns. In these instances, Bateman contradictorily responds with violence, anger, disgust or complete and total denunciation, reaffirming the inherently violent unspoken logic of neoliberal socio-economic policy and ideology. Capitalist realism, thus, is a belief that there is no alternative to capitalism and that it refers to a fatalistic attitude of resignation in the face of the hegemonic and totalizing situation which we have previously outlined. For Fisher, it seems the only reaction is to cynically and even nihilistically or fatalistically 'accommodate ourselves to the dominance of capitalism and limit our own hopes to containing its worst excesses'.[48] Ultimately, it amounts to the violent 'naturalisation' of the neoliberal subjectivity which appears pathological and impersonal – confirmed as

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[45] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 15.
[46] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 15.
[47] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 15.
[48] Fisher, 'Capitalist Realism: Is There Still No Alternative?'.

a maniacally laughing Bateman, touching his own chest expecting to find his heart thumping quickly, instead finds that 'there's nothing there, not even a beat'.[49]

Demystifying the intrinsic links between the scenario hitherto introduced and its relationship with violence, Žižek reads violence both as and against the structural coordinates of a given reality that establishes the primacy of certain forms of violence while denigrating and condemning others that do not ascribe to or promote its own values or agenda. Žižek demarcates violence as a persistent threat inherent in the system that is not only identifiable as directly physical but effective in 'more subtle forms of coercion that sustain the relations of domination and exploitation'.[50] Through exploitative and alienating practices of financial speculation, the structure of material society is changed, unpinned from material praxis and manifests itself as a sublime, horrific, entity hidden beyond the pale of semiotic reality. Ultimately, then, the solipsistic and indifferent nature of neoliberal capitalism can be understood precisely as a particular form of violence as it exercises power against the subject (and population), via an infiltration and co-option the very field of socio-political, economic and ontological discourse and debate at an unconscious level.[51]

When walking through the city's zoo, Patrick Bateman notices a sign that reads 'COINS CAN KILL'.[52] Of course, this non-too-subtle observation is illustrative of the novel's satirical representation of capitalism and violence. What is just as pertinent, although much less explicitly visible in the narrative, is *American Psycho's* terrifying account of capitalist realist society, wherein violence often appears the residue or consequence of an ideologically formed desire for capital and the integration of the subject into capitalism's systems. The novel's opening scenes present us with a perfect example of this as Price states: 'When your body has become so *tuned* into the insanity and you reach that point where it all makes sense, […] *let* the fucking bitch *freeze* to death, *put* her out of her own goddamn self-made misery'.[53] This 'logic' is indicative of the way in which an inherently violent culture of competition and consumption applies and justifies itself, turning the victims of society into immoral, monstrous and disgusting enemies.[54]

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[49] Fisher, 'Capitalist Realism: Is There Still No Alternative?'; Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 112.
[50] Žižek, *Violence*, p. 9.
[51] Žižek, *Violence*, pp. 12–3.
[52] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 286.
[53] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 5.
[54] Ellis, *American Psycho,* pp. 125–6.

It is telling that throughout the novel, the abuse and violence against the poor or those outside of the wealthy elite barely registers a pause. But, when the target is someone wealthy or attractive – seemingly the two criteria of value for the human subject within neoliberal, consumer culture – then the follow-through becomes much more problematic for Bateman. This is exemplified as he fantasises about the possibility of murdering Patricia and comes 'to the conclusion that [she] *is* safe', that he is not going to take any pleasure in the spectacle of her suffering for no other reason than, as is implied, 'because her wealth, her *family's* wealth protects her tonight'.[55] Measured against the assertion that Price and Bateman can happily advocate letting the poor freeze to death (or in Bateman's case, directly murder them), this demonstrates the acceptability of classist violence and hatred at a societal and psychological level as the 'logical', desirable way of thinking. Indeed, Price's disturbing reaction to the times is contradictorily one of harrowing acceptance/complicity and apathy. Demonstrated in his outward persona, Price advocates social injustice and is complicit in the continued functioning of the neoliberal, ideological fantasy to the extent that it is recognized as the only logical/acceptable world-view. What is more disturbing in the passage is the way in which Price has actually convinced himself that the social/political mechanisms and discourses are not to blame, that the culpability lies firmly with those at the lower end of the social spectrum – that they 'want' to be in this situation, or as Bateman tells Al: 'you have a negative attitude'.[56] Their total lack of actual, practiced, liberal tolerance exposes the hegemony of conservative, republican ideology of competition and dominance in the increasingly capitalist realist world-view wherein they cannot think, or even desire, except in terms of neoliberal classism and economic competition.

For neoliberalism to succeed in creating such a horrific and totalising system as the one described above it has to be supported by a stratagem that convinces of its practical dominance. As Harvey explains, neoliberalisation demands a society and cultural environment predicated on consumerism and solipsistic libertarianism.[57] Indeed, this state of socio-cultural affairs is recalled by Bateman when he describes how his temptation to murder is 'replaced by this strange anticipation to have a good time', or to achieve some immediate form of distraction or gratification from the

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[55] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 74.
[56] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 125.
[57] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 42.

mundane and otherwise intangible horror of existence.[58] Antonio Negri defines the postmodern (or late capitalist) phase as the period of the 'establishment of a global society of control' and as the period which realizes the world market and subsumes society under capital.[59] Furthermore, it is the phase wherein spectral capital assumes a totalizing and hegemonic position and adopts its most threatening and parasitic form 'not only upon labour but upon life itself'.[60] Whether inherently terrifying itself, or a symptom of wider, more nihilistic concerns, the postmodern era, characterised by the increasing ubiquity and spectral prevalence of capital, is synonymous with a sense of terrifying indeterminacy and the inescapable threat it poses to stable knowledge.[61] There is obviously an underlying traumatic and terrifying problem with the 'logic' of capitalism as it is here described, particularly when considered alongside the notion of Gothic-postmodernism, as earlier alluded to. Patrick Bateman, victim of these underlying and insidious pressures further articulates his concern, demonstrating the extent of the depersonalization and terror wrought by the postmodern, capitalist-realist socio-cultural hegemony. 'Everything failed to subdue me', he states, and:

> The only thing that didn't bore me, obviously enough was how much money Tim Price made […]. There wasn't a clear, identifiable emotion within me, except for greed and, possibly, total disgust. I had all the characteristics of a human being – flesh, blood, skin, hair – but my depersonalization was so intense, had gone so deep, that the normal ability to feel compassion had been eradicated […]. I was simply imitating reality, a rough resemblance of a human being, with only a dim corner of my mind functioning.[62]

This passage demonstrates that, while the term 'capitalist realism' is accurate for our current nightmarish predicament, it is clear that *American Psycho* expresses the delusional fantasy of the scenario. This is a culture predicated on the primacy of the aesthetic and of capital that is sustained by a violent depersonalisation or reification of the subject into the mechanics of the capitalist system and the subsequent masking of the real horror underlying its ideological and ritual violence against the subject. Or, to put it bluntly, as Bateman states, 'all it comes down to is [this]: I feel like shit but look great'.[63]

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[58] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 50.
[59] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 332.
[60] Matthews, *Ethics and Desire,* pp. 89–90.
[61] Alex Link, 'The Mysteries of *Postmodernism*, or, Fredric Jameson's Gothic Plots' *Gothic Studies* 11:1 (2009), 70–85 (p. 70).
[62] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 271.
[63] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 103.

These very same questions related to the prominence of, and even desire for violence, and the violence of capitalism occupy the remainder of this chapter as I question the extent to which the horrific and violently destructive acts and fantasies (of Patrick Bateman) undermine their own effectiveness in the wake of a wider and more insidious capitalist appropriation and recoding. As the critics cited over previous pages allude to, there seems to be a 'rudimental systemic violence of capitalism, much more uncanny than any direct pre-capitalist socio-ideological violence' that menacingly operates behind the surface of everyday social exchanges and operations.[64] It is a violence which is all the more troubling in that it is not 'attributable to concrete individuals and their "evil" intentions, but is purely "objective", systemic, autonomous'.[65] The abstraction of the operations and effects of neoliberal capitalism is later developed into a much more speculative and indeed spectral examination in Chapter Four of this thesis. Nonetheless, in the following I describe how the violence of capitalism (as its own terrifying and horrific realism) is presented in the novel, referencing the ways in which the novel dramatizes the fantasy of fictitious capital and consumerist values as both a scene of horror and the only absolute, coherent and referential entity. Fredric Jameson famously suggests this when he argues that in the modern cultural imagination, it is far easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. The now seminal implication here is that fatalistic human decline into nothingness and annihilation is far more conceivable than the degeneration or abandonment of capitalism as the dominant or default economical condition of the world.

As the product of a particular period in US history increasingly characterized by extreme speculation, financial excesses and monstrous social and political policies, violence *in* the novel and the violence *of* the novel demand a careful reading that recognizes, as Žižek has argued, that the hope to escape is impossible, as 'ontological violences are everywhere'.[66] Indeed, as James R. Giles observes in his critique of Ellis's novel, '[violence is] the ballast of ideologies' – 'it is what gives hegemonic structures stability. Structural oppression is always dependent of violence'.[67] During the 1980s, Wall Street's ascendancy coincided with a period of rapidly increasing

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[64] Žižek, *Violence,* pp. 12–3.
[65] Žižek, *Violence,* p. 13.
[66] Abel, *Violent Affect*, p. xiii.
[67] James R. Giles, *The Spaces of Violence* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), p. 6.

social inequality, a situation explicitly obvious in the repeated scenes of wealth, luxury and excess in *American Psycho,* punctuated by downtrodden figures of defeated homeless in the streets. At the heart of the neoliberal economic project, then, is an inherent desire to alienate, destroy and manipulate both dissident and othered voices, as well as whole strata of the population both symbolically and effectively. The disturbing implication underpinning Ellis's text is that the neoliberal agenda achieved precisely this, snuffing out any sense of empathy or collective tolerance towards those who are excluded from and by the neoliberal system. Even more jolting is the extent of the scorn and antipathy that is routinely doled out by Bateman and his wealthy colleagues to the 'crazy fucking homeless', who for Bateman and his colleagues, are the detritus of society, living beyond the logical and necessary principles of a supposedly functioning society.[68] In a later scene, Bateman confronts a blind homeless man and rather than exhibiting any sense of compassion or consideration, steps on him. That Bateman then turns to the reader and asks, 'did I do this on purpose? What do you think?' shows the extent to who which Bateman is immune to empathy, instead focusing on his own solipsism.[69] Either, Bateman's actions were intentional, and then highlights the antipathy felt towards the – quite literally – downtrodden; or, perhaps even more unsettlingly, Bateman completely fails to register the man as he, himself, is blind to these 'othered' figures, purged from mainstream, neoliberal society, and who represent the negative surplus of the system Bateman embraces.

In a capitalist system that demands competition, the permeance of cultural anxiety, and ever more excessive and violent displays of power, it is ironic that in the run up to Timothy Price's disappearance from the novel he is seen pleading that 'society can*not* afford to lose [him]' besides the word FEAR, spray-painted on a building wall.[70] The latent and layered violence within capitalism provokes Price's crisis as throughout his interactions, the relegation of his own sense of individuality is pronounced and he adopts the hackneyed rhetoric of the misogynist, racist yuppie. Individual qualities and agency, which Bateman on occasion seeks to exhibit (and is often chastised for), fail to register within a system that rewards those who become well-functioning objects/mechanisms, or, in strictly financial terms, who become

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[68] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 5.
[69] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 79.
[70] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 3.

'assets'. Price's exit from the text follows an acknowledgment towards his own increasing depersonalization within the financial culture of which he is part of. His hatred of his job is the first indicator of this, which he describes to Bateman in the following terms: 'The fact remains that no one gives a shit about their work, everybody hates their job, *I* hate my job, *you've* told me you hate yours. What do I do? Go back to Los Angeles? *Not* an alternative'.[71] That Price ends this quote with an admission of defeat and the pessimistic conceit that he is trapped alludes to his recognition of the mindless and endless cycle of violence that this outlook incites, and his feelings turn from anger to confusion and apathy. Instead, Price's 'alternative' is to seek distractions, as he becomes self-loathing and cynical, seeking an 'out' which is either taboo (reflected in Bateman's embarrassment for Price's antics in Tunnel), rationally inconceivable, or (as his disappearance and subsequent reappearance late in the novel show) is totally undermined and presented as meaningless and inconsequential.

In his study of contemporary transgressive fictions, Mookerjee conducts an extended analysis of *American Psycho*. Mookerjee places Ellis within the important tradition of American satirical writing for his ability to target the establishment and undermine the status quo. As a result, the critic here likens Bateman to an 'antisocial *hero*' within a novel that is increasingly concerned with the shape and character of society as a whole and with its discontents. In his analysis, satire(s) demand abjection, which is the relinquishment of the self, a distinction which revives a self-destructive reading of transgression and the consumerist excesses which brings the subject(s) themselves closer to death.[72] I consider that Mookerjee's analysis of the satiric novel is, for the most part accurate. Although, I would suggest that in the case of *American Psycho* satire ultimately gives way to cynicism as a grim, passive nihilism follows the failure to articulate an alternative to, or break from, an abusive and fully assimilated neoliberal capitalist ontology. Instead of trying to articulate some resistive or eschatological proposal, Bateman instead turns to nihilistic destruction and resigns himself to his own meaninglessness. He states his desire for 'pain to be inflicted on others' and for 'no one to escape', and yet even after admitting as much, 'there is no catharsis. [He gains] no deeper knowledge about [him]self, no new understanding'.[73] With 'no more barriers to cross', compulsive and consumptive pain and suffering

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[71] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 3.
[72] See: Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction*, pp. 196–207.
[73] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 362.

become, for Bateman, the vocabulary by which he can register his utter discontent and disillusionment.[74]

The violence of the system, as I have here described, is evident as the novel's primary subject, Patrick Bateman (unable to assimilate meaning and reality or value to interchangeable entity) is left disorientated and fluctuates between inertia and compulsion within a political and cultural economy predicated on consumption. Bateman's role in the novel is to demarcate the apparent shift from disaffection, to violent action and then to apathy and cynicism. This reflects wider, melancholic cultural reactions to the disintegration and subsumption of reality and subjectivity against the gains of capitalist realism that have been implied in the works of the likes of Lyotard, Land, Fisher and Žižek. Bateman's fatalist resignation to this situation corresponds with Ellis's satirical undermining of a society predicated on the terrifyingly reciprocal and blank game of consumerist mimesis. This is frighteningly addressed when Bateman is bluntly asked why, if he hates his work and life so much, he does not quit. His response is illustrative of the underlying and horrific extent of his coercion: 'because […] I… want… to… fit… in'.[75] In the final section of this chapter, I focus on the novel's use of violence and the extent to which this represents an attempt to attack the system of neoliberal capitalism and to revivify some affective or affirmative sense of meaning. Crucially, I posit that, as is evident in the case of Patrick Bateman, outwardly directed violent activities fail to achieve this aim and are inherently doomed to ineffectiveness. The violence on display in the novel may be considered an affective phenomenon that offers a glimpse of something real or other (a logic unto itself), and lays bare the anxieties of a subject and the abuses of the damaging capitalist realist logic. However, the following section asserts that outwardly directed violence in the novel both fails and underscores the urgent need to consider self-destruction as the text's most transgressive trope.

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[74] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 362.
[75] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 228.

Re-valuing Violence in *American Psycho*

As I have begun to introduce, Ellis's *American Psycho* is a highly multifaceted novel that confronts the reader with anti-capitalist themes, the ethics and aesthetics of violence, as well as a philosophical concern with postmodernism and the horrific nihilism of neoliberal capitalism. Likewise, the novel is characterised by a somewhat Gothic postmodern 'fascination with terror, the negative and the irrational, and [a] hostility towards accepted codes of reality'.[76] In so doing, it stages the conflict and traumatic antagonism between spectral violence, the spectacle of violence and the existential concerns underlying not just this novel, but contemporary fictions of self-destruction more generally. Here the antagonism emerges from a sense of disconnect between the violent event carried out by Patrick Bateman's murderous hand and the metaphysical and insidious ideological violence purported by neoliberal capital itself, which supplants values and desires with a virulent logic of desiring-capitalism. In so doing, the novel, as a profoundly postmodern work of horror (as opposed to a blank and vacuous work), presents an astute, philosophical and literary engagement with 'the terror that currently haunts our collective unconscious as part of our postmodern culture of fear'. It also points towards the role of transgression and transgressive art in overcoming this.[77]

Transgression, as described in this thesis's introduction, is the relinquishment of self in order to bring a subject closer to death or, in this case, closer to an alternate relationship with life. As Matthews and Mookerjee argue, Ellis's transgressive work of fiction succeeds in making the boundaries between fact and fiction indistinct from one another, as Patrick Bateman seeks a path out of the blank and affectless materialist reality through violence and corporeal experience.[78] As alluded to previously, the proliferation of instances where violence and capitalism either occur side by side or, all too disturbingly, become aesthetically indistinguishable within the novel highlights Ellis's intent to undermine the nightmarish ontological malaise of the Republican political and cultural milieu and exposes the limits and possibilities of transgressive and affective means of recourse. Transgressive acts described in literatures force their readership to re-evaluate conventions of sense of moral and literary decorum and the

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[76] Beville, *Gothic-Postmodernism,* p. 16.
[77] Beville, *Gothic-Postmodernism,* p. 24.
[78] Matthews, *Ethics and Desire,* p. 10; Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction,* p. 196.

nature/validity of the limits they place on certain acts. Distinct from the entropic, violent transgressions in *American Psycho,* this is further addressed through the quite literal crossing of limits and transgressions of Tim Price. Indeed, the transgressive nature of Price's emotional breakdown and subsequent escape from the text, I suggest, is illustrative of the contestable and unassimilable nature of self-destructive or self-negating deviance within the capitalist realist environment. Furthermore, it also goes some way towards demystifying, undermining and deconstructing the inherent, excessive and grotesque forms of violence within the narrative.

Bateman's relationship with Price unfolds as the only seemingly meaningful relationship that Bateman has. Colby describes this as something of a doppelgänger relationship and outlines the extent to which Bateman appears the rational double of this obscene antagonist, reflected in the way that Price and Bateman seem to mirror and revolve around each other.[79] It is important that this relationship be thrown into crisis after Price's disappearance and marks the point at which Bateman begins to perceive himself as increasingly isolated and decentred from society itself, exemplified as others rebuke his appeals for company.[80] Earlier in the novel Bateman refers to Price as the only interesting person he knows and, at first, this compliment alludes to Bateman's belief that Price is a successful model capitalist of the ilk to which he aspires. However, I contend that Bateman actually is translating something appealingly other in Price's behaviours, something lacking in the interchangeable 'GQ' types who populate his environment and which causes him to reflect on his own idiosyncrasies.

In the scene before his disappearance, Price is seen murmuring to himself, and although what he says remains elusive, the act has a disconcerting and troubling effect in the context of the novel. In this gesture, Price recognizes and relates to an other sense of self and foregrounds a subjective disunity which the trappings of capitalist culture cannot obfuscate entirely. This fracture corresponds with his unwillingness to accept his place as another reified and indistinguishable unit and influences his decision to 'get out'.[81] Price's almost blasphemous intention to disappear and seek an alternative to the landscapes of capitalism, to 'find out what lies behind the blackness,'

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[79] Colby, *Bret Easton Ellis*, pp. 74–5.
[80] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 60.
[81] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 57.

reflects a radical and self-destructive will to undermine capitalist excess through a desire for the bleak nothingness beyond the margins (or railings) of capitalist reality.[82] The impact this scene has on Bateman cannot be understated, as it is not only the fraternal figure of Price who is damaged. Instead, the entire neoliberal 'logic' which Bateman commits to, the late-capitalist reality and one's understanding of one's place within it, becomes a source of great anxiety throughout the rest of the novel, as, haunted by the implications of the meaninglessness of Price's disappearance, he becomes increasingly disillusioned and destructive.

Price's disappearance marks a significant turning point in the novel. After it, Bateman's fantasies of deplorable sexual and violent transgression increasingly punctuate the monotonous description of consumer products and pop-culture references which hold his attention. Conversely, it is the most violent scenes, particularly those of a sexual nature, that elicit the greater sense of frustration and boredom from the narrator as he confronts the extent to which his unfulfilled desires and drives taunt and fill him with 'a nameless dread' to which he retreats into the familiarity of consumerist compulsion.[83] This is alluded to when Bateman describes his own relationship with sex and pornography: 'I'm beginning to think that pornography is so much less complicated than actual sex', he states, and 'because of this lack of complication, so much more pleasurable'.[84] For Bateman, real contact and real experience is less preferable than a mediated, depthless and aesthetic sex as the surfaceless, transactionary nature of pornography is better in keeping with his own apathetic, emotionless consumerist approach to desire. This is telling, as Bateman describes his failed sexual encounter with Evelyn, wherein he can climax only when thinking about a Calvin Klein advertisement, and in an altogether more disturbing scene where his increasingly violent pornographic fantasies are cut short by a compulsive aside about popular music, followed by a conversation about Pepsi.[85] The emotional depth and gratification conventionally attributed to sex in the novel is often, on the surface, the thing that Bateman desires, but in reality this desire gives way to an even more perverse and violent compulsion attributable to the affectless economies of neoliberal capitalism. When Bateman tells a woman he is flirting with that he is 'into

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[82] Ellis, *American Psycho,* pp. 57–8.
[83] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 321.
[84] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 163.
[85] Ellis, *American Psycho,* pp. 23; 94.

murders and executions', the fundamental neoliberal economic occupations and processes – mergers and acquisitions – become horrific and satirical metaphors for the imbued violence which capitalism imparts on the subject(s). It is a satirical pun which Ellis uses with the intention of raising the very serious implications about the kind of world inhabited by Bateman and his Wall Street colleagues, one in which the mundane occupations of a privileged and introvert elite have very real life and death implications on whole swathes of populations globally.

Throughout *American Psycho*, the reader is witness to capital's haunting and ubiquitous presence as it obfuscates its own lack of concrete (phenomenological) basis and establishes itself as the only viable alternative. Bateman and his contemporaries experience the situation of neoliberal and postmodern capitalism as reality at its most excessive, perverse and terrifying: throughout the narrative, capitalism spreads into all corners – it is present in public spaces and the bedroom, in leisure and in the workplace. Indeed, for Bateman and his contemporaries, it has become that enjoyment itself, that which they each spend their waking hours in desperate search for, is framed as what Lyotard describes as a 'political economic perversity'.[86] That is, that the subject's (and society's) very drives are now the perverse remit of 'the body of exchanges [within] the circuit of the communication of exchanges and goods'.[87] In the scene where Bateman 'lasciviously' whispers his economic activities to unsuspecting victims, while maintaining 'a strong pulsing erection', it becomes clear to the reader that it is capital that has supplanted Bateman's erotic desires.[88] The degrading nature of capitalism is revealed in his 'freakish piglike grunts' and explicitly aligns a perverse pursuit of sexual gratification with the obscene and deviant imperatives of the neoliberal cultural hegemony. Despite the inherently limited nature of violent affect, which, as described, often becomes the excessive extension of neoliberal convention itself, what is notably revealed through Bateman's relentless cataloguing of perverse torture and death is a traumatic fascination with violence and its irrational, transgressive possibilities. It is a fascination which, like in the fiction Sade, subliminally and self-destructively corresponds to the 'possible desire of the

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[86] Lyotard, *The Libidinal Economy,* trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993 [1974]), p. 158.
[87] Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy,* p. 83.
[88] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 155.

executioner to be the victim of torture himself' and to the desire for existential and affective affirmation.[89]

Sade's influence on the novel is evident in the gruesome scenes of violence that convey a disturbing or transgressive impression of bodies – quite literally, when bodies are opened up, laid bare and exceed their utilitarian function within the mechanics of neoliberal capitalism as Bateman attempts to explore his own psychosis, desire and existential possibilities. Sade's literary representation of violent and sexual transgressions sought to exceed the body beyond its limits through re-augmentation/mutilation in what the libertine would consider a divine act. Bateman's mutilations, however, become more and more gratuitous and excessive as they increasingly fail to arouse any sense or experience of erotic transcendence. For Bateman, who has 'dreams that were lit like pornography and in them [he] fucked girls made of cardboard', ultimately, corporeal experiences and sexual transgressions become nothing more than an empty and dull distraction from the (supposedly) more disquieting apprehensions of consumer culture.[90] In one particularly disturbing scene, Bateman simulates oral sex with the decapitated head of Torri, one of his many victims.[91] As the grotesque act is 'amusing for a while' it becomes clear that bodies are no more than commodities to be used in any way imaginable for the immediate pleasure of the subject, and then discarded. In so doing, the use and abuse of bodies illuminates the intense transformation of the body as an appendix or supplementary object of solipsistic neoliberal capitalism itself. This advanced stage of reification is succinctly outlined by Timothy Bewes, as the way in which our selves, and the subject, are increasingly and fatally transformed into a series of removed objects within the framework of late capitalism. In this scenario, the individual becomes 'ever more deeply inserted into epistemological categories which further falsify [their] relation to the world'.[92]

Ellis's blank and atonal representation of Bateman's violence (whether real or imagined) exhibits an experience of excess and subversion which 'challenges a closed economy (predicated on utility, production and rational consumption) […] and calls for

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[89] Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, p. 98.
[90] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 192.
[91] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 292.
[92] Timothy Bewes, *Reification, or The Anxiety of Late-Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2002), p. xi.

the individual to reach lower, more 'essential' human drives'.[93] For Bataille consumption comes in two forms, the first being that which sustains/maintains the mechanisms of production and the second one being a 'sovereign' ends in itself. It is essentially a primordial excessive consumption in pursuit of something other that undermines utility and economic order.[94] In an age of capitalist realism, Bateman's acts of serial consumerism and murder fail to directly overcome or offer a sense of relief, nor does he achieve sense of release (sexual or otherwise). Bateman's cannibalism, for example, in 'Tries to Cook and Eat Girl,' delineates how bodies (particularly women's bodies) have become consumables and his repeated attempts to 'possess' women by having sex with and then eating them symptomatic, not of an individual nihilistic will for destruction, but of a perverse consumptive logic of capitalism, carried out to its most destructive degree.[95] His flourishes of violence and excess allow for this failure to be read as a cynical critique of the omnilegitimizing logic of capitalism. Ultimately, through the production of terror and the aesthetic of violence, *American Psycho* analyses the relationship between consumptive desires that sustain capitalism as a logical imperative and the repressed, human desires and frustrations which Bateman records. When Bateman commits an atrocity, the need to diagnose the extent to which this act is real or fantasy is unimportant. Instead, the reader must assess whether the violence reflects the unseen violent ideology of capitalism (i.e. consumerism carried out to its most extreme conclusion) or whether it is reflexive of a nihilistic drive to expose the unreliability of 'reason' itself and undermine societal codes of acceptability and logic.

Transgressions, such as cannibalism, murder or assault are even more problematic within the text, as they appear inconsequential, and/or, in the context of the novel, are not distinguished by Bateman as morally reprehensible or unacceptable. In this way, the excess of these violent acts does not 'go beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or law or convention', which according to Chris Jenks, is the criteria of transgression, nor do these acts successfully reflect an act or sense of denial or affirmation.[96] To some extent, acts of violence throughout the novel no longer seem able to transgress social taboos/limits and signal toward an end of transgression. This

[93] Messier, 'Canons of Transgression', p. 184.
[94] Jenks, *Transgression*, pp. 103–4.
[95] Ellis, *American Psycho,* pp. 330–3.
[96] Jenks, *Transgression*, p. 2.

is born of a recognition that in the logic of postmodern culture, and indeed, imbued in the capitalist realist model of society, nothing tangible or conceivable exists beyond the glare of hyperreal screens, corporations and consumption. Foucault argues that transgression is 'neither violence in a divided world (in an ethical world) nor a victory over limits (in a dialectical or revolutionary world); and exactly for this reason its role is to measure the excessive distance that it opens at the heart of the limit'.[97] Yet, in *American Psycho*, transgression, the violent and the excessive, is absorbed or assimilated into the general operation of capitalist realism; its once necessary and 'divine' function to gratuitously affirm both limitlessness and nothingness is (within this ideological-aesthetic reality) denied. Fascination with transgression is subliminally deemed essential to the structural and ideological functioning of contemporary society. Similarly, and perversely, excess is co-opted by capitalist mechanisms and is something to strive for; it is a marketing tool and a signifier of one's elevated position.

As described in this part, throughout *American Psycho,* violence against bodies is presented as 'ephemeral and inconsequential', and as Gomel points out, 'Bateman's attempts to access the truth […] through violence only further trap him' in a vacuous, glib and inconsequential cycle of mundanity.[98] As Hardt and Negri argue, the ebb and flow of capital conducts 'the great orchestra of subjectivities reduced to commodities' and determines the 'limits of desire'.[99] In this way, the world inhabited by Bateman ultimately resembles the clearest instance of a lifeless, nihilistic and oppressive 'non-place'.[100] Consumerism produces an environment in which people themselves become objects to be fetishized and destroyed, thus bringing the subject closer to the real experience of death.[101] A 'reified' society 'is one from which meaning has vanished, or in which meaningful statements become impossible', thus the reified subject is a vanished subject, void of depth, expression and agency and reduced to pieces.[102] While this subjection of the subject within neoliberal capitalism has been

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[97] Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression', p. 35.
[98] Gomel, 'Violence and Fashion', p. 51.
[99] Hardt and Negri, pp. 346–9
[100] Hardt and Negri, pp. 346–9
[101] Bewes, *Reification,* p. 3; Dix, *The Contemporary American Novel in Context*, pp. 31–56: Dix et. al revise Annesley's use of the word 'consume' to highlight different forms of consumption within the novel. It was Annesley who first argued that in Patrick's excessive drive to consume the latest foods, consumer goods and seek out the most exclusive tastes represents 'an image of consumption that combines consumer urges with much more obviously corporeal desires […]. The word consume is thus used in all of its possible meanings: purchasing, eating and destroying. These three meanings converge in Bateman's sexual murders.' (Annesley, *Blank Fictions,* p. 16)
[102] Bewes, *Reification*, p. xii.

widely studied in criticism of Ellis's novel, what is interesting is less the reading of Bateman as a (horrific, monstrous) product (both literally and figuratively) of his environment, but a reading of his subjective insecurity and transgressions as symptomatic of this reification into the functional logic of capitalist-realism. Moreover, what is needed is a reading that considers such affective disturbances as a response to inherently postmodern terrors that are exemplified in the seepage of gothic terror throughout the novel, and in the failure of the prospect of an alternative as relief.

Horror, as Fred Botting notes, opens a 'hole that sees traditional images consumed, destroyed, used up', whilst at the same time, becomes a 'locus of projection […] a screen for more baseless images and their consumption'.[103] If the baseless nature of contemporary existence for Bateman is a source of horror, as confirmed in part two of this chapter, then it also becomes a screen against which Bateman can project his own fantasies of corporeal consumption. Fantasies which the ever-shifting capitalist-realist cultural environment seems only too happy to reciprocate, facilitate and commodify. Violence, as the final part of this chapter examines, performs a similar function, as the logic and economy of violence throughout the novel validates Bateman as committed neoliberal capitalist subject, rather than as rebellious, transgressive subject. In so doing, the failure of transgression is somewhat pre-empted by the way that capitalism and postmodernity have subsumed dissidence into their own logic to exude a sense of 'no exit'. Ultimately, Bateman's violent acts (his transgressions against the co-option of the bodies of reified subjects) demonstrate the failure to exceed or remove oneself through an excessive consumption/destruction of others.

In the introduction to this thesis I posited that horror need not be read as simply the entropic fixation with monsters, mayhem, ghosts and gore, but, as Brian Zager posit, is characteristic of the 'omnipresence of nothingness that threatens human presence'.[104] Evident in the absence of meaning and affect that Bateman often reels against, in *American Psycho* there is a clear recognition towards the inherent and insatiable horrors of postmodernity, experienced here as terror that provokes a near-complete corporeal and ontological collapse leading to the violent reaction against others and self. In one particular scene, Bateman finds himself struggling to control

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[103] Fred Botting, *Limits of Horror*, p. 147.
[104] Bruhm, 'Anchors Away!', p. 4.

his own body having been overcome by a desire and anticipation for the consumption of something 'deeper' and 'undefined'.[105] In this scene, Bateman moves 'involuntarily', 'uncontrollably' and struggles to resist the urge to start slapping himself in the face. Indeed, this scene is illustrative of the extent to which Bateman is overcome with (amongst many other issues), a traumatic and violent sense of self-doubt. The effects of this existential desire for something beyond or other to that conventionally experienced are projected and realised through often-graphic exhibitions of annihilation.

In *Heroes,* Berardi states that his philosophical interest in the figure of the mass murderer is piqued by the sense that they, too, are suffering and their transgressions represent an attempt to 'express their psychopathic need for publicity and also to find a suicidal exit from their present hell'.[106] Financial capitalism, as shown, is based on a process of 'unrelenting deterritorialization', that is, the unhinging and dissolution of anchoring notions of permanence, security and stability.[107] The result is the cultivation of a state of semi-permanent fear and terror among those living precariously amidst the violence of the capitalist world. 'This fear', as Berardi states, 'in turn provokes a counter-effect of aggressive re-territorialization by those who try to grasp some form of identity'.[108] In Berardi's estimation, transgressive figures operating within this kind of cultural and economic scenario are the tragic manifestation of the nihilism of the age of financial capitalism, responding to the age's state of 'permanent deterritorialization by enacting their craving for belonging through a chain of acts of murder, suicide, fanaticism, aggression'.[109] Reeling from the existential meaninglessness he experiences day to day, for Bateman, the cracks, quite literally, begin to show in the façade of reality. When, having struck his financial rival, Paul Owen, with an axe, Bateman screams at him and then stands in solemn anticipation staring at a crack in wall.[110] This mark or fracture is quite literally the metaphorical sign that reality's stable veneer of infallibility, and indeed Bateman's own mask of sanity, are slipping as a result of financially motivated violence and materialism. It is also an allusion to the existential dread which threatens to undermine late-capitalism. In turn,

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[105] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 157.
[106] Berardi, *Heroes,* p. 3.
[107] Berardi, *Heroes,* p. 104.
[108] Berardi, *Heroes,* p. 104.
[109] Berardi, *Heroes,* p. 5.
[110] Ellis, *American Psycho,* pp. 208–9.

Bateman grasps at all he can for some sense of stability and to wrest some control, sense of meaning and existential permanence.

Throughout the novel, certain frivolities cannot be resolved or fully rationalised within the logic of capitalist absolutism, as Bateman understands it. Instances, as trivial as they may at first appear, such as the elusiveness of the reservation for the exclusive restaurant Dorsia or the truth as to how a (supposedly lesser) colleague, Owen, landed the mysterious and prestigious Fisher account, offer a glimpse through the socio-cultural fantasy to reveal a baseless, meaninglessness void. In the wake of such inconsistencies, Bateman's rage builds, and existential chasms are said to open before him. When his brother nonchalantly acquires a Dorsia reservation, which had otherwise been so elusive to Bateman, he struggles to rationalize this and begins to fantasise about disappearing through the cracks as a relief. His consideration of the possibility of escaping then takes a more sinister turn, as Bateman uses his own existential angst as justification for the inherent meaninglessness of *other* lives: 'the world is better off with some people gone', he asserts: 'Some people truly do not *need* to be here'.[111] In such instances, his own existential sense of himself (as really-existing individual) that he so meticulously crafts and pieces together through excessive spending and exhaustive body-shaping regimen, pales into irrelevance. Despite his own subjective anguish and his occasional flirtation at the brink of ontological collapse, like the mass murder or suicidal figure described in Berardi's account, Bateman demonstrates an inability to conceive of a viable alternative for himself beyond the capitalist-realist world as his actions fail to markedly deviate from the compulsive and consumptive patterns of behaviour that contribute to his existential malaise.

Bateman's response to his anguish and terror is similarly pathological; however, it is also illustrative of the success of the capitalist realist ontology that no rational conceit or rebellion is possible. Bateman's response is primarily twofold. Firstly, he retreats to (or accelerates into) the familiar, safety-net of consumer capitalism: A reality which, for the most part, is structured, logical and ordered insofar as his wealth affords him a level of security and status. That on one occasion he boasts of having rented the same movie from the video store on thirty-seven separate occasions highlights the extent to which he routinely reaches out for any modicum of familiarity as an anchor.

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[111] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 217.

When meaning, reality and subjectivity appear so attuned to the ebb and flow of the postmodern cultural economy, and the 'individual' is maligned by the unseen and obscene imprint of capitalism and death itself appear to lose any emotive or affective meaning. In the aftermath of a particularly horrific scene, Bateman is unmoved. 'No fear, no confusion,' he recalls, despite the presence of a defecated, decomposing and half-eaten corpse in the room.[112] While this scene (imagined or real) affects him deeply and to the extent that he recalls his intention to keep a memento of his crimes through the staining/marking the wall with the blood of his victim, the picture that is presented to the reader in the text itself reveals nothing. This is indicative of the novel generally as throughout, violence is often betrayed by affectlessness or meaninglessness, and by the visible dissolution of any boundary to transgress obstructs meaningful/affective action from interfering with the everyday systematic functioning of individuals. As a result, when Bateman gets too close to a traumatic and unknown sense of alterity, his reflex is to turn back to the mundane and 'logical' activities, mechanisms and forms of consumption which retain meaning within his world.

Secondly, Bateman's turn towards violence or aggression (both against bodies, through consumption, and through the aggressive and hostile 'mergers and acquisitions' demanded by his employment) is an attempt to reinstate the primacy of the ethereal logic or order of the postmodern, capitalist hegemony in the novel. To put it plainly, violence and aggression mark an attempt to reassert the values of capitalism that Bateman understands: the accumulation of wealth, expenditure, sex, success and excess are constitutive of his status and identity. In this sense, Bateman's counter-effect to the depersonalisation and insecurity he experiences is, in fact, a delusional and aggressive re-assertion of the deceptive and entrapping logic and values of financial capitalism as they remain constitutive of his identity. Moreover, by supplanting the nuances of individual identity/subjectivity with the stock values of neoliberal capitalism, the failure to articulate an alternative is pronounced as the subject becomes further trapped within and by the processes of neoliberal capitalism itself.

Up to this point, the reading of *American Psycho* I present is a pessimistic one that has put little value or importance on the transgressive and affective prowess of

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[112] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 294.

outwardly-directed or driven violence as it routinely fails to incite any sense of ethical, moral or affective recourse from an omnilegitimising capitalist-realist hegemony. Ellis's disturbing demonstration of the plight of Patrick Bateman attests to one thing: we need to stop thinking of exertive displays of violence and transgression as some kind of anti-cultural, resistant or negating modality. Violence (both as threat and as grotesque form of consumption) sustains the economic model and is witnessed in the social inequality and the relationships between people throughout the city itself. Ultimately, the aesthetic of excess and violence in *American Psycho* leaves the increasingly disaffected and traumatized subject lacking the will and means to transgress and undermine the ideological-aesthetic capitalist system. Violence fails as an incubator of change throughout *American Psycho*, as outward displays of assaults and murders possess no affective threat to society or subjectivity that remains victim to an insidious violence inherent to contemporary culture itself. Following this contention through, it is reasonable to suggest that *American Psycho* actually presents a society devoid of transgression, as in Ellis's representation of a world without moral or ethical limits; there is little distinction between the aesthetic of violence and the aesthetic of the mundane and the everyday.

Unwittingly uncovering the contradictions and unreality of his surroundings, Bateman, as here described, takes his frustrations out on those who seem like the 'logical' threats to his position and mental stability. However, as his violence increases with little or no sense of gratification, the meaninglessness and falsity of capitalism becomes uncomfortably apparent, inciting a traumatic descent into tedium and nihilism: 'I can already tell that it's going to be a characteristically useless, senseless death, but then I'm used to the horror. It seems distilled, even now it fails to upset or bother me'.[113] Just as nothing can subdue Patrick Bateman's violent impulses, there is likewise no entity or activity that can alleviate the terrifying unseen pressures of the imperative to consume. Furthermore, that Bateman realizes that his actions and fantasies will never be violent or excessive enough is significant and his sense of unfulfillment and increasing realization of the meaninglessness of his present nightmare corresponds to an increasingly bleak and nihilistic desire for something

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[113] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 315.

other – a disassociation and erasure of the gap between reality and fantasy, which, as Žižek argues, 'is the first step towards liberation'.[114]

Han describes the neoliberal subject as 'running aground on the imperative of self-optimization'.[115] The desire or striving always for more, as per the neoliberal cultural and subjective compulsion towards excess, leads towards destruction and violence. Throughout this chapter, however, I have examined the extent to which the excessive use of violence serves to undermine the socio-political and the literary and artistic discourses illuminated by the text. It appears that Bateman's repeated transgressions, excesses and violence, which emerge from a desire to affirm or placate himself within an unassailable cultural and economic scenario, do little to incite any kind of subjective transcendence or alleviation of the terrors of capitalist postmodernity. In confirmation of Abel's earlier cited conclusion, the entropic violence throughout the novel is drained of any trace of authorial or narrative judgement and demands that the reader challenge their own morals and ethics. Typical of the Gothic-postmodern novel, *American Psycho's* use of terror in and beneath the surface level of the text bears witness to the death of reality and subjectivity by the unseen violence of capitalist realism and exposes the anxieties of a culture/society under a repressive economic system. While Patrick Bateman is a man (or an abstraction of a man) fatalistically resigned to his fate, his increasingly repulsive transgressions do expose the existential terror and 'dreaded uncertainty' of the world, attributable to a 'crucial' and self-destructive negation of the values that define him in the capitalist-realist world.[116] Consequently, his excessive violent fantasies/acts are less a reaction against his situation and more a symptom of it. Exposing this, Bret Easton Ellis utilises violence as a means of critique, highlighting and undermining the systematically violent ideological foundations of financially-obsessed consumer societies in which, paradoxically, there is neither 'nothing of value,' nor any exit.[117]

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[114] Slavoj Žižek, 'The Ambiguity of the Masochist Social Link.' *Perversion and the Social Relation*, ed. by Molly Anne Rothenberg and Dennis Foster (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003b), 112–25.
[115] Han, *Psychopolitics*, p. 32.
[116] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 364.
[117] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 364.

Conclusion

This chapter has contributed to a reassessment of violent transgression in a key work of literature that stages the transformation of a subject's existential response to the contemporary (or specifically, the horror of the cultural and ontological logic of capitalist realism) as it moves from affirmation to cynicism. Moreover, this chapter has challenged the artistic and fictive engagement with violence as a transgressive gesture, articulating the apparent futility and limitations of outwardly-directed acts of misdemeanour and excess as it appears within *American Psycho.* Through an engagement with the critical works of Fisher, Žižek and others, this chapter has shown that violence is an inherent constant in the foundation of postmodern financial culture as a dehumanizing, consuming and omnilegitimate force. As a result, I have lauded Ellis's novel on the occasions that it makes the horror of this scenario apparent, presenting the capitalist realism of the late twentieth-century as a fictive and abusive model that demands critique. I have thus asserted that while Bateman's violence is not transgressive by the standards maintained and developed in this thesis's introduction, such actions and fantasies do highlight the extent to which transgressive fictions must abandon actions that seek to exceed or affirm a subject, and instead explore the possibility of engaging with a complete absence or negation of self.

Capitalism positions itself as the only concrete or conceivable world-view in the eyes of Bateman and his contemporaries and in so doing exposes the extent of the usurpation of ethical value with the vehement belief in the absolutism of capital, despite the apparent contradictions and the subjective crisis that this incites. While the novel makes apparent the indistinguishability between violence and capitalism through Bateman's actions, throughout we bear witness to the effective co-option of unconscious desire and disillusionment by the logic of capitalist realism itself. Ironically, *American Psycho* is not violent enough because the rage that exists deep within characters like Bateman and Price is not effectively utilized to challenge the status quo or the nightmarish cultural situation. Instead the transgression(s) which we witness within the novel either further antagonize the subjective crisis increasingly apparent in Bateman and Price, or else contribute to an even greater, more intense, reification of subjectivity and desire into the metaphysical fluxes and machinations of neoliberal capitalism.

Although Bateman does not routinely engage in acts of violence against himself, his actions inadvertently see to his continuous and even accelerated deterioration into capitalism at a significant cost to his own sanity and status. Nonetheless, Bateman's actions and fantasies of destruction inadvertently take their toll on him to the extent that he does experience a collapse of identity. That said, the raison d'être of this chapter was not the positioning of *American Psycho* as a prominent literature of self-destruction owing to the entropic violence described, but to highlight Bateman's inability to adapt or redirect his transgressive ire, essentially, from subjects (others) to the system (that is, to the ontological framework against which he himself manifests) and to self. Instead, it has been to highlight the contradictory and fraught way in which the novel utilises entropic violence as a means of highlighting the limits and failures of such outwardly directed transgressive gestures themselves – in a sense, to state that the old rules or conventions regarding radical, shocking and discursive action no longer apply within a socio-cultural environment that forestalls and co-opts motivating and excessive energies into its own machinations.

With nothing solid to hold on to pertaining to both the world around him and his own innate sense of selfhood, rational subjectivity collapses. The only totem left to grasp is the physicality of the body itself which, through violence and horror becomes a register for Bateman's own existential trauma and an anchor for a life that otherwise has no foundational basis. As capitalist realism emerges as a somewhat gothic, postmodern and horrific concern that indexes a disconcerting lack of material relativism behind the governing factors of late-postmodern reality for Bateman and his contemporaries, the novel's erasure of the gap between reality and nothingness incites a traumatic and nihilistic response. This is seen most clearly in the scene where a totally decentred and 'out of sync' Patrick Bateman – appearing in the third person – runs through the streets of Manhattan in a murderous rampage.[118] This scene is followed by a failed, self-destructive attempt at confession that reveals nothing other than Bateman's lack of agency as his voice 'lacks any authority' and he becomes a figure of ridicule.[119] As this scene pertains to, Bateman's fantasies of disappearance or escape are exacerbated throughout the latter stages of the novel as he moves further towards more nihilistic and self-destructive thought processes. Ultimately,

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[118] Ellis, *American Psycho,* pp. 333–9.
[119] Ellis, *American Psycho,* pp. 372–3.

however, Bateman fails to commit to a transgressive disavowal of the omnilegitimacy of capitalism or excessive and violent consumption. In the next chapter I examine how the fiction of Ellis's contemporary, Chuck Palahniuk, responds to similar problems related to the endemic failure of violent transgression. For Palahniuk, a valid response to the pressures of the capitalist realist socio-cultural environment is not (necessarily) found in gestures of accelerated, reciprocal and solipsistic engagement in violence against others. As this chapter has confirmed, such activities ultimately lead to existential collapse and the further degeneration of the offending subject. In the following chapter, through the fictions of Palahniuk, I consider the relationship between the formal and literary application of self-destruction and the turn from narcissism to community as a means of resisting or formulating an alternative to capitalist-realist cultural conditions here examined in Ellis.

CHAPTER TWO — DESTRUCTION AS AFFIRMATION IN THE EXTREME COMMUNITIES OF CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S *FIGHT CLUB* (1996) AND *HAUNTED* (2005)

Issues in Reading the Fiction of Chuck Palahniuk

As demonstrated in the preceding chapter, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) set the tone for transgressive fiction post-1990 and successfully brought into question the value and role of literary fantasies of violence as symptomatic of, and respondent to, capitalism and cultural/subjective despair. Chapter One examined the extent to which violent and bloody acts or fantasies in contemporary literature have the power to challenge our understanding of the acceptable within increasingly nightmarish neoliberal capitalist settings. Revisiting violence as a valuable critical tool, I concluded that Ellis's critique was to an extent limited — even undermined — as Bateman's narcissism made him incapable of following the destructive fantasy through to its necessary conclusion in the wake of an inability to change/escape and the lack of an alternative to postmodern neoliberal society in the novel. Subsequent chapters in this thesis will build on these important themes introduced in Chapter One, beginning with a demonstration of how Chuck Palahniuk's fiction responds to similar scenes of discontent and cultural abjection. Unlike Ellis's blank text, Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) and *Haunted* (2005) explore an alternative based in affirmative and transgressive communal experience. For better or for worse, Palahniuk's characters come together in the face of death as subversive groups who consider the experience of self-inflicted pain and death as an insubordinate means of resisting and negating social rules.

Charles Michael "Chuck" Palahniuk's career as a published author began with the publication of *Fight Club* in 1996.[1] The novel initially achieved a fair amount of

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[1] See Gerald Howard's 'Introduction', in Chuck Palahniuk (author) and Cameron Stewart (illustrator), *Fight Club 2* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2016), pp. 5–6.

commercial and critical success and caught the attention of filmmakers leading to a film adaptation in 1999, directed by David Fincher.[2] Although not a box-office success, the film later became a cult favourite following its DVD release making Palahniuk marketable as a controversial, experimental and satirical author. Of his catalogue of transgressive, disturbing and widely popular fictions, *Fight Club* (1996) and *Haunted* (2005) bookend the first decade of his literary career and offer divergent critical perspectives on some of the most prominent and reoccurring themes in his early work, namely violence and community. In both, an ethics of self-destruction, transgression and an engagement with extremity are validated through their communal possibilities, their critical aversion to postmodern and neoliberal culture and their destabilising and satirical intent. It is evident that novels such as *Invisible Monsters* (1999)*, Choke* (2001) and *Lullaby* (2003)*,* which were also published during the first decade of Palahniuk's career also explore themes of self-destruction, self-harm and the role of community.[3] In these works protagonists such as Carl Streator, Brandy Alexander and Victor Mancini negotiate a journey from intense, unpleasant acts of self-destruction to the safety and security of fledgling communities (or relationships). My focus solely on *Fight Club* and *Haunted* derives from my assessment that these two novels are exemplary and notably variant versions of the self-destructive narrative that is paramount to Palahniuk's literature. *Fight Club* is a novel which holds great cultural currency and has persistently been championed as a watershed fiction that, not only launched Palahniuk's literary career, but remains an accurate and unstinting repository for the commentary and critique of contemporary postmodernism, existential discontent and neoliberal capitalism. *Haunted,* arguably more so than Palahniuk's other literature, is a novel whose reputation often precedes it owing to the notorious reputation of at least one of the short stories featured within. Beyond its sheer infamy, *Haunted,* I argue, is the culmination (and to some extent an inversion) of literary experiments in the subject of community, cultural critique and transgressive self-destruction which epitomise his early works. In this novel, the author is able to collate

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[2] Winner of 1997 Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award and 1997 Oregon Book Award for Best Novel: *Fight Club,* Dir. David Fincher, (20th Century Fox, 1999).

[3] In *Invisible Monsters,* the narrator is a former model who, in an act of rebellion against the iconocentric culture she resides in, mutilates her own face before joining forces with the empowering Brandy Alexander, as they travel around America in a trip of self-discovery. Similarly, in *Lullaby,* the narrator Carl Streator, having inadvertently killed his own wife and child, seeks refuge in the company of others as they set about to seek and destroy all remaining copies of the book which he attributes to the death of his family. *Choke* recalls the misadventures of Victor Mancini, a sex addict and con man, who often turns to self-harm (simulating or engineering his own suffocation) in the hope that a bystander will save him and then feel obliged to financially support him.

much of the subject matter evident in the likes of *Invisible Monsters, Lullaby,* and *Choke* (which follow a similar narrative pattern of self-destruction, followed by retreat into community, followed by catharsis or sense of acceptance) and explore an alternative wherein self-destruction instead follows the 'escape' into a community who actually facilitate and demand transgressive mutilative and destructive behaviours as a means of affecting tangible or material change in their real-world circumstances. Ultimately, and more so than those fictions published between these totemic works, *Fight Club* and *Haunted* authorize and admonish self-destructive outsiders and present extreme outsider communities as abstract models for a rebellious society fighting against the alienating hegemonic logic of late-capitalism and cultural postmodernism (or capitalist realism, as identified in the previous chapter).

Palahniuk's fiction is driven by an underlying intention to unsettle and affect the reader, as well as to alleviate and numb the pain felt by his characters within contemporary western societies through satire, horror and violence.[4] It is a characteristic that Kathryn Hume, while undervaluing the literary, philosophical or political merits of such gestures, deems indicative of a growing 'aggressive' style of contemporary literatures that revels in unadulterated antagonism and seeks to shock or disturb the reader.[5] Palahniuk's use of shock and horror (and often humour) reveals a conscious effort on the part of the novelist to shake or disturb the readers' core foundations, or as Hume describes it, to attack the reader's ontological assumptions. As alluded to in what the author dubs 'the Guts effect', Palahniuk's fictions strive to recreate a wider effect of revulsion, horror and a sardonic or grotesque humour in order to elicit or release deep-seated emotions in the reader. Importantly, it is an effect which, as Palahniuk argues, can only be reached when a writer commits fully to writing freely and without restraint or decorum.[6] Palahniuk's literary humour is considered throughout this chapter as (indicative of the) grotesque and transgressive — to the 'disjunctions between the vile and the comic, disgust and irony'— and the excessive.[7] Throughout his fictions grotesque gestures, particularly those related to violence, sex

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[4] Chuck Palahniuk, 'Not Chasing Amy', in *Non-Fiction* (London: Vintage, 2004), 141–6 (p. 143).
[5] Kathryn Hume, 'Attacking the Reader's Ontological Assumptions', in *Aggressive Fictions* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2012), 141–163. Hume's reading of this trend, however, often fails to convince as it is far too broad in its scope and makes many unqualified assumptions regarding the temperament and moral proclivity of the 'mainstream' readership.
[6] Chuck Palahniuk, 'The Guts Effect', *The Cult: The Official Fan Site of Chuck Palahniuk,* January 2008 <https://chuckpalahniuk.net/features/the-guts-effect> (accessed 20 September 2018).
[7] Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, *Grotesque* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 2.

and death, provoke both laughter and anguish and incite a sense of Bataillean 'inner experience'. For Bataille:

> Encounters with horror, violent disgust, that miraculously transform into experiences of laughter, intoxication, ecstasy, constitute […] inner experiences that overwhelm any sense of distinction between interiority or exteriority.[8]

Inner experience is the destructive 'process in which subjectivity is torn apart' and the cause of one's identity to 'flow away'.[9] In Palahniuk's early fictions, these excessive traits are central to and symptomatic of the self-destructive and rebellious intention of his characters to re-make themselves as the transgressive Other, a theme central to my readings in this chapter.

Fight Club (1996), follows the descent into self-destructive anarchy of an unnamed insomniac narrator who struggles to cope with his disaffection and sense of isolation in the world. In response, the narrator seeks connections. He does so firstly through attending self-help groups where he is confronted by death and disease which perversely helps him to cope with life — that is, until he meets Marla Singer, another 'faker', and the sessions subsequently lose their effect on him. He then meets Tyler Durden and with his help they establish a network of Fight Clubs wherein men bond over the shared experience of fighting. As the fights become increasingly routine they no longer make up for the narrator's growing desire for complete destruction. In response, Tyler starts Project Mayhem as an anarchic extension of Fight Club that (through violence, mischief and mayhem) seeks to destroy the foundations of corporatism, consumerism and a culture that alienates and scars the subject. However, by the end of the novel the narrator's attempts to rid himself of the influence of Tyler, who is revealed to be a psychotic projection of his own disturbed mind, and his acolytes, culminates in his shooting himself (not fatally) before Marla and other members of support groups save him.[10]

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[8] Botting, Fred and Scott Wilson, 'Introduction: From Experience to Economy', in *The Bataille Reader,* ed. by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 1–34 (p. 2).

[9] Botting and Wilson, *The Bataille Reader,* p. 2; Paul Hegarty, *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist* (London: Sage, 2000), p. 89; Noys, *Georges Bataille*, p. 38.

[10] The novel has since been revisited with the publication of its sequel, *Fight Club 2* (2016)*,* which gives some background to events in the preceding novel, such as the insinuation Tyler had been with the narrator a lot longer than previously assumed, appearing to him as an imaginary friend in childhood and is actually the symptom of a hereditary condition or disease that the men in the narrator's family suffer. The sequel also revisits a lot of the communities and support groups introduced in the novel, demonstrating the extent to which community and people finding one another in spite of ever-increasing trauma and violence is still a central concern for Palahniuk.

Similarly, *Haunted* (2005) (an experimental novel composed of twenty-three short stories, including the notorious 'Guts', and free-verse poems, held together by an interjected frame narrative) describes the turn of events that follows after characters are locked within an abandoned old theatre which serves as their Writer's Retreat. Whilst the short stories are each interesting and useful departures into typical transgressive themes of sexual deviance, violence, cultural satire and death, it is the framing narrative which provides much of the material for my own readings in this chapter. This narrative describes how a large group of traumatized or retreating individuals come together and engage in clandestine acts of violence, farce and destruction as they cultivate the grotesque conditions of incongruity and instability necessary to write a story capable of changing their lives.[11] Each of the occupants has responded to a call to 'Abandon Your Life for Three Months. Just disappear. Leave behind everything that keeps you from creating your masterpiece. […] Before it's too late, live the life you dream about'.[12] Having deserted the real world and attempting to capitalise on and play up to the perverse cultural appetite for horror, the self-styled 'modern equivalent of the people at Villa Diodati' resolve to create a 'masterpiece', '[a] true life horror story with a happy ending' that will make them rich and/or absolve themselves from past sins.[13]

Both *Fight Club* and *Haunted* force their readership into the often-turbulent minds of traumatised rebellious and violent characters whose anxieties toward neoliberal culture exaggeratedly reflect our own. For Mark Steven, in his study of horror cinema and cultural critique, contemporary Capitalism is 'a mode of production whose […] absurd machinations barely conceal a structure that ensures a superabundance of violence'.[14] Palahniuk's protagonists respond to the very same capitalist conditions by foregrounding the prevalent generational and existential condition of abject cynicism and inherent cultural violence (as described in Chapter One) wherein radical disobedience is stifled or ineffective and in which individuals are

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[11] It is no coincidence that 'The Story of Us' reads like a disturbing parable of the story of the US, or as Moore describes it, 'the dark mirror reflecting the murderous heart of America' in contemporary times. Clayton S. Moore, 'Review of Haunted', *About.com Contemporary Literature* (2005) <http://contemporarylit.about.com/od/mysteryreviews/fr/haunted_1.htm> [accessed 24 September 2016].

[12] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, p. 84.

[13] Palahniuk, *Haunted,* pp. 82; 84. The reference to Villa Diodati is an allusion to the summer of 1816 when Lord Byron, Mary Godwin (latterly Mary Shelly), Percy Bysshe Shelly and John Polidori spent three days locked within the villa and in their isolation wrote what would later become some of the most important texts in the bourgeoning Gothic literary canon, including *The Vampyre* and *Frankenstein.*

[14] Mark Steven, *Splatter Capital* (London: Repeater, 2017), p. 14.

increasingly alienated from others and from themselves within a violent cultural configuration. Throughout these narratives, cynicism grows as a pathological buffer against impending existential collapse, often exemplified in the individual and societal 'flight into solitude and interiority and an abnegation of politics on the basis of inauthenticity'.[15] In Palahniuk, the encounter with the trauma and tragedy of neoliberal and postmodern culture and the negative effects of the cultural, political and economic co-option of transgression, violence and revolution is contested through an experimentation with bodily violence and self-destruction. In response to existential and cultural despondency, satiric fictions 'cut through a problematic political stance of indecision in order to enact a radical de-centring of the fundamental coordinates of society'.[16] Palahniuk's fiction thus must be read as the transgressive response to the antipathy which plagues generations brought up in a nihilistic and increasingly meaningless culture of never-ending violence, media and technological intrusions, and consumerism.

Both novels are indicative of Palahniuk's literary intention to move beyond cultural cynicism to undermine the postmodern, neoliberal paradigm via a confrontational approach to death, destruction and community. Despite the problems inherent in such subversive movements, as will be discussed, Palahniuk challenges our stance towards and tolerance of outsider communities, death and anarchy in contemporary fiction. In the remainder of this introduction I present the themes central to Palahniuk's fiction before outlining this chapter's original response to what is an important and critically under-researched area in Palahniuk, namely, the interplay between (self-)destruction, death and the role of the extreme community. Following this, I examine how an array of important critical readings of disobedience and the subversion of cultural and political systems in Palahniuk's narratives have established a lively critical backdrop against which my own readings are necessary.

Underlying *Fight Club* and *Haunted* is a recognisably neoliberal socio-cultural framework that cannot be meaningfully or effectively challenged through acceptable channels. It is widely argued that, 'while neoliberalism is taken as a sign of capitalism's supposed victory […] body horror provides […] a countervailing satire' of the neoliberal

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[15] Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity*, p. 1.
[16] Matthews, *Ethics and Desire*, p. 2.

ideal.[17] As a result, in both novels, protagonists seek subjective and social freedom (the renegotiation of the world on one's own terms) based on nihilistic innovation, corporeal transgression and negation of values, through an explicit and extreme communal relationship with death and destruction. They also foreground the corrosion of individual and communal identities and freedoms, as well as the inability of normative society to articulate a viable alternative. Despite the failings of the rebellious actions of their characters, *Fight Club* and *Haunted*, prescribe an almost sacred, instinctive and self-destructive collective response, premised on disobedience and excess, which validates these fiction as radical and transgressive critical interventions within the context of an otherwise cynical and nihilistic contemporary culture. As a result, these texts are to be taken seriously and treated as valuable critical works worthy of deeper and more thorough academic study, a position I defend in the following section by outlining the key critical issues that arise from reading Chuck Palahniuk's fiction.

Palahniuk is increasingly credited as a great diagnostician of American discontent whose fiction is symptomatic of contemporary political and philosophical tensions in a postmodern world that is simultaneously without limits and devoid of alternative.[18] The critical recuperation of Palahniuk's work has been an ongoing task, particularly since the film adaptation of *Fight Club* in 1999, and since the academic journal *Stirrings Still* dedicated an issue to the examination of the existential significance of Palahniuk's fiction in 2005.[19] Since then, Palahniuk has been the subject of countless scholarly articles and works, as well as a number of edited collections and monographs and a documentary.[20] For certain critics and reviewers Palahniuk's literary 'merits' are obscured by his engagement with critically repellent themes and have been vehemently dismissed in arguments that his work is gratuitously shocking, deviant, adolescent and irresponsible, with few redeeming features.[21] For others, reading Palahniuk's scenes of violence, sex and misdemeanour in his early-to-mid-career fiction is likened to the experience of having 'your eyes

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[17] Steven, *Splatter Capital,* p. 29. See also: Aldana Reyes, *Body Gothic.*

[18] Eduardo Mendieta, 'Surviving American Culture: On Chuck Palahniuk', *Philosophy and Literature,* 29:2 (2005), 394–408 (pp. 394; 395; 401; 407).

[19] *Stirrings Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature,* ed. by Erik M. Grayson*,* 2:2 (Fall/Winter, 2005).

[20] *Postcards form the Future: The Chuck Palahniuk Documentary*, Dir. by Dennis Widmyer, Kevin Kölsch, and Josh Chaplinsky (Kinky Mule Films, 2003).

[21] Jonathan Dee, 'Ready-Made Rebellion: The Empty Tropes of Transgressive Fiction', *Harper's Magazine* (April 2005), 87–91.

rubbed raw with broken glass'.[22] The reason for this kind of masochistic appreciation of his fictions stems from a recognition that novels like *Fight Club, Invisible Monsters* (1999)*, Choke* (2001) and *Haunted,* for example, articulate the 'deadening, regressive, and potentially dangerous symptoms of postmodern life' that restrict and diminish subjectivity.[23] Invitee of both academic and mainstream vitriol and praise, for many critics his early body of work, which also includes the fictions *Survivor* (1999)*, Lullaby* (2002), *Diary* (2003) and *Rant* (2007)*, for example, are unflinching studies of the 'dark compulsions and actions of characters struggling to find fulfilment' within a media and technology-saturated environment under the 'crushing weight of the past' and history.[24]

Consistent throughout the entirety of Palahniuk's body of fiction (including those published in the second decade of his literary career which, generally, have been less-well received critically and commercially) is a discernible sense of hope that underpins the numerous examples of self-destructive nihilism enacted by his protagonists. Jesse Kavaldo describes his early fictions as 'elaborate rituals of self-ruin' underpinned by a moral desire for connections which elevates a protagonist and the way in which their destructive actions should be read.[25] Certainly such critiques provide an excellent basis through which to further interrogate the use-value of self-destruction and transgression as a radical means of escape or alterity in the social, existential and political contexts of Palahniuk's fiction. Bridging the gap between violence and the philosophical and ethical comment instilled within his fiction, I argue that behind the pathological, transgressive and self-destructive actions of his characters lie the very human desire for meaning, for shared experience and community in the wake of socio-economic, cultural and existential discontent. Indeed, Palahniuk's subversive critical stance against consumerism, capitalism and cultural postmodernism is evident throughout his numerous fictions and has both inspired and confounded a number of critics over the years.[26]

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[22] Jesse Kavaldo, 'The Fiction of Self-Destruction: Chuck Palahniuk, Closet Moralist.' *Stirrings Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature,* ed. by Erik M. Grayson, 2:2 (Fall/Winter, 2005), 3–24 (p. 3).
[23] Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Rubin, 'Introduction', in *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem,* ed. by Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Rubin (London: Routledge, 2009), 1–6 (p. 3).
[24] Kuhn and Rubin, *Reading Chuck Palahniuk,* p. 1.
[25] Kavaldo, 'The Fiction of Self-Destruction', p. 5.
[26] See: Dee, 'Ready-Made Rebellion, 87–91.

This reading and reception of the novel can be traced to Henry Giroux's early and contentious critique of *Fight Club*, which responded to consumerism/cultural postmodernism, the violent exhibition of masculinity and a hierarchical sexism in the novel and film.[27] Giroux is vocal in his condemnation of *Fight Club*'s dangerous misogyny and proto-fascism, deeming it 'morally bankrupt and politically reactionary', suggesting that despite the film's revolutionary appropriations, it fails to deliver 'enlightened forms of social change'.[28] The effects of consumerism also inform James Annesley's reading of *Fight Club,* although he reiterates that Palahniuk's response is more ambiguous (both complicit and counter to violent systems of control) than Giroux credits and recognises a value in the text's overt critique of consumerism and the damaging narcissism of postmodern culture.[29] Although scathing in tone, Giroux's critique outlines many of the divisive tensions within the novel, including the negative effect of consumerism; the extent to which violence and transgression are utilized with political and radical intent; as well as an attempt to understand and provide some early context as to how communities function in Palahniuk's fiction.

Ever present and underlying Palahniuk's fiction since his debut novel is the unconscious spectre of subjective, existential and cultural discontent.[30] This theme is developed by Andrew Slade, who through an engagement with Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, diagnoses deep fissures of conflict and anxiety between individuals who are in search of a 'perverse sublime' and the repressive culture evident in *Invisible Monsters* that subjugates them.[31] James R. Giles, similarly, applies Freudian psychoanalysis to read symptoms of profound self-hatred and insecurities within *Fight Club*, which are intensified in the late-capitalist cultural space and manifest through violence and the psychic split into Tyler Durden.[32] For Giles, in particular, each symptom edges towards irrationality in which violence becomes pathological and

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[27] Henry A. Giroux, 'Brutalised Bodies and Emasculated Politics: *Fight Club,* Consumerism and Masculine Violence', *Third Text,* 53 (2000–2001), 31–41.

[28] Giroux, 'Brutalised Bodies', pp. 37; 35.

[29] James Annesley, 'Branding, Consumption, and Identity', in Annesley, *Fictions of Globalization*, 27–59. To some extent, Annesley shares Giroux's concern at the novel's conceptual flaws, although Annesley is much more conciliatory towards the novel, highlighting certain redeeming features in its attempted critique of consumerism and identity.

[30] See for example: Sherry R. Truffin, 'This is what passes for free will': Chuck Palahniuk's Postmodern Gothic', in *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem*, ed. by Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Rubin, (London: Routledge, 2009), 73–87; Mendieta, 'Surviving American Culture', 394–408.

[31] Andrew Slade, '*Invisible Monsters* and Palahniuk's Perverse Sublime', in *Chuck Palahniuk: Fight Club: Invisible Monsters, Choke,* ed. by Francisco Collado-Rodriguez (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 81–96.

[32] James R. Giles, 'Violence, Spaces, and a Fragmenting Consciousness in *Fight Club*', in *Chuck Palahniuk: Fight Club: Invisible Monsters, Choke,* ed. by Francisco Collado-Rodriguez (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 23–43.

'directed inward' because the 'objects that motivated it (father, mother, capitalism, death) remain "persistently out of reach"'.[33] Like Giles and Slade, many subsequent readings of Palahniuk's fiction have focused on the psychological/pathological and existential consequences of dissatisfaction as demonstrative of his critique of the subjective fatigue felt by his fictional postmodern and neoliberal subjects.

However, whilst there has been a tendency to examine cultural anxiety and frustration in relation to psychological trauma or effects in Palahniuk's early-to-mid career fictions, there has also been a pronounced trend towards uncovering any dehumanising or negative corporeal effects of postmodern and late-capitalist discontent. Andrew Hock Soon Ng, for example, cites Sartrean existentialism and Sadean body-politics to argue that *Fight Club*'s objective is to 'reverse postmodernism's damage' through a manipulation of the flesh and a self-affirming realisation of one's own presence and being-in-itself.[34] Andy Johnson likewise demonstrates how, in *Invisible Monsters,* narcissism (considered the neoliberal ideal of individualism) mutates into an existential self-hatred leading to self-inflicted corporeal destruction in order 'to be free'.[35] This corporeal focus often portrays violence in a life-affirming vein, with this affect becoming a device that radically separates the subject from ever-expanding contemporary disciplinarian culture.[36] The result of this has been the elevation of the necessity of reading violence in his fiction as valid method of defiance, and as it leads to the creation of idiosyncratic worlds/communities that negate the influence and control of postmodern and neoliberal society at large.[37]

Reading destruction and self-harm in Palahniuk's novels often requires that we reconsider our idea of the acceptable. Throughout his early fictions, as many of the previously cited critics can attest to, Palahniuk's view of violence and transgression is ambiguous in his foregrounding of the satirical, nihilistic and existential intention of his

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[33] Giles, 'Violence, Spaces', p. 31.

[34] Andrew Hock Soon Ng, 'Muscular Existentialism in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*', *Stirrings Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature,* ed. by Erik M. Grayson, 2:2 (Fall/Winter, 2005), 116–138 (pp. 116–7).

[35] Andy Johnson, 'Bullets and Blades: Narcissism and Violence in *Invisible Monsters*', in *Sacred and Immoral: On The Writings of Chuck Palahniuk*, ed. by Jeffrey A. Sartain. (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 6172– (p. 68).

[36] Laurie Vickroy, 'Body Contact: Acting Out is the Best Defense in *Fight Club*', in *Chuck Palahniuk: Fight Club: Invisible Monsters, Choke*, ed. by Francisco Collado-Rodriguez (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 61–75 (p. 62).

[37] Scott Ash, 'Going To the Body: The Tension of Freedom/Restraint in Palahniuk's Novels', in *Sacred and Immoral: On The Writings of Chuck Palahniuk*, ed. by Jeffrey A. Sartain. (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 73–88 (p. 87).

narratives as protagonists seek to fundamentally transform their lives through disobedience and horrific acts of self-destruction and self-disregard. Considering this, several critics have sought to explain how Palahniuk's transgressive fiction embraces destructive perversity to further a critique of the contemporary and to experiment with social, political and subjective alternatives.[38] In one leading example, Graham Matthews underlines the importance of the sublime in *Fight Club*'s transvaluation of contemporary culture's notion of the acceptable and the moral*,* through a reapplication of nihilism.[39] Olivia Burgess, on the other hand, introduces a utopian dynamic (distinct from Matthews' nihilism) into the contentious political ethical implication of Palahniuk's *Fight Club.*[40] Like some of the critics cited earlier, for Burgess, *Fight Club* demonstrates how the body itself has become the site against which we can explore difference and the alternatives to an 'oppressive social order'.[41] In both works of criticism, the annulment of complicity in the ongoing exertion of neoliberal maxims allows the combatants at fight club to strip away 'the semblances that sustain their position within the sociocultural order' and empower themselves to reconstitute society and their place within it.[42] In doing so, these actions seemingly articulate a perverse and radical value in transgressive self-harm in Palahniuk's early novels that I shall return to throughout this chapter.

Transgressive acts or fantasies, particularly the embrace of death and violence (seen in *Fight Club* and *Haunted*) undermine the acceptable through the articulation of liberating alternatives premised on self-annihilation that stand in direct response to the frustrations inherent to the everyday lives of the suffering postmodern and neoliberal subject. For this reason, I argue that Palahniuk's narratives of self-destruction are committed to anti-capitalist (and often apolitical) alternatives to the conservative, ordered neoliberal cultural hegemony. Naomi Mandel further confirms that there has been a shift in attitudes towards violence and transgression as an anti-capitalist or apolitical gesture which is evident in post-1990s fictions that more routinely

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[38] See for example: Johnson, 'Bullets and Blades'; Andrew Slade, 'On Mutilation: The Sublime Body of Chuck Palahniuk's Fiction', in *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem*, ed. by Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Rubin, (London: Routledge, 2009), 62–72; Colin Hutchinson, 'Cult Fiction: "Good" and "Bad" Communities in the Contemporary American Novel', *Journal of American Studies,* 41:1 (2008), 35–50.

[39] Graham Matthews, 'Nihilism and the Sublime in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*' in Matthews, *Ethics and Desire*, 59–81.

[40] Olivia Burgess, 'Revolutionary Bodies in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*', *Utopian Studies,* 23:1 (2012), 263–280.

[41] Burgess, p. 269.

[42] Matthews, *Ethics and Desire,* p. 80.

capture the antipathy of generations X through to Z (millennials and post-millennials).[43] These generations, she argues, are invariably more in tune with (and angered by) the increasing reification and saturation of consumer culture and neoliberalism than their predecessors.[44] As I will proceed to establish in the remainder of this chapter, *Fight Club* and *Haunted* are fluent examples of contemporary novels that critique the generational condition of cynicism through a controversial approach to the transgression of societal norms which undermines/negates the moral fabric on which neoliberal society is built. Through fantasies of self-destruction, disobedience and the nihilistic re-writing/re-forming of a past self, these novels explore how the 'liberators' and 'monsters' of the likes of Tyler Durden and Mr. Whittier embody transgression and instigate the communal challenge toward the contemporary.[45]

In their approaches to excess and death in the context of community, *Fight Club* and *Haunted* reveal a subversive kinship with (and in some regards, even the direct influence of) key theoretical and literary figures like George Bataille and Maurice Blanchot. Bataille, for example, argues that conventional morals are not a suitable basis for society at large, owing to the fragility and fluidity between limits and transgressions as a structural foundation. Instead, he argues that the confrontation with the loss of self and the sacrificial relinquishment of life corresponds in a better perspective towards universal subjective and communal experience.[46] Indeed, in Bataille's work, as Benjamin Noys describes, subversion takes place through 'his reopening of the thought of community, through his violent opening of freedom and through his transgression of the body'.[47] Similarly, for Blanchot, the derivation of community involves a decisive awareness and experience of death in the world: '[t]hat is what founds community. There could not be a community without the sharing of that first *and last* event'.[48] For Blanchot, true community is revealed in death because death exists as the singular communion of all mortal beings. Death (or our perception and experience of it) is a loss that defines humanity. Both Blanchot and Bataille critique any social system or community that obscures what they perceive as an affirming

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[43] Mandel, *Disappear Here,* p. 2: To clarify, generation X are widely regarded as those born between the late 60s and early 80s, who would typically be approaching adulthood around in the 90s.
[44] Mandel, *Disappear Here*, p. 2.
[45] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, pp. 110–1; Palahniuk, *Haunted*, pp. 89; 123.
[46] Bataille, *Eroticism,* p. 31.
[47] Noys, *Bataille*, p. 13.
[48] Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community,* trans. by Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988), p. 9. Emphasis added.

potential inherent to the confrontation with death just as Palahniuk's tormented and traumatized outsiders seek affirmation in numbers and shared experiences that lead them closer to death (whether metaphorical or actual).

Against the hegemony of political conservatism resembling a disenfranchising and abusive neoliberalism, the communitarian theme within transgressive fictions assumes even greater importance in its articulation of a secessionist strategy against the socio-cultural mainstream for the dissenting and radical left. As Palahniuk's fiction (and indeed that of Ellis, Ballard and to a certain extent, Ligotti) demonstrates, it is a pressing issue within contemporary Anglo-American fictions to address precisely the subversive, transgressive or radical impact of these communities as they act against or withdraw from the socio-political mainstream and reassess 'individualistic and libertarian discourses'.[49] Palahniuk's fiction is instructive as he presents mainstream culture as an undesirable space that works against the subjective and communal interests of human beings. When Simon Critchley informatively addresses the problem of outsider communities in the wake of the failed utopian and rebellious episodes of the 1960s and into the contemporary era, he argues that today:

> The various anti-capitalist experiments in communal living and collective existence […] seem to us either quaintly passé, laughably unrealistic, or dangerously misguided. Having grown up and thrown off such seemingly childish ways, we now think we know better than to try and bring heaven crashing down to earth and construct concrete utopias. To that extent, despite our occasional and transient enthusiasms and Obamaisms, we are all political realists; indeed, most of us are passive nihilists and cynics. [50]

For Critchley, past attempts were 'doomed' to failure as they were 'too *moralistic'* and overly attached to an idea at the expense of a frontal denial of reality'.[51] As a result, he reads that today's culture has raised a generation of cynical nihilists who mistrust or lack the faith required for a socially workable, ethical project of society. In his responsive depiction of (often active-nihilist) outsider communities and their violent and transgressive actions in *Fight Club* and *Haunted,* Palahniuk, however, explores the extent to which the withdrawal or disengagement from the socio-cultural mainstream becomes a valid, radical possibility. In the era of the postmodern, neoliberal capitalism (which is the dominating political and cultural realism against

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[49] Hutchinson, 'Cult Fiction', p. 35.

[50] Simon Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 144.

[51] Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless,* p. 145. Italics in original.

which these novels are set) relies on the promulgation of subjective angst and social alienation to solidify its hegemonic position. As is evident in fictions like *Invisible Monsters, Lullaby* as well as those here studied, outsider communities are, for Palahniuk at least, important in that they bring the disheartened and the disillusioned together to act out their frustrations and ultimately represent an alternative.

Against the backdrop of capitalism (or capitalist realism, as articulated in Chapter One) and a shifting attitude towards violence within society, desire and community can be seen as antagonistic forces.[52] Palahniuk's approach to such 'outsiders' and outsider groups is a sympathetic one steeped in satire and premised around shared experiences, namely the experience of death and excess and the disappointment of the contemporary world. Matthews contends that 'satire produces a negative excess that results in enjoyment'.[53] In *Fight Club* and *Haunted,* specifically, it is the excessive, the grotesque and the repulsive that bring people ecstatically together. In their extreme communities, people are given the license to act out their trauma and frustration and renegotiate their relationship with the world at large. Indeed, it is the precise point of Mr. Whittier's Writer's Retreat in *Haunted* to give societies' victims, rogues and outcasts the opportunity to 're-tell' themselves completely and self-destructively, whilst it is the intention of the fight club to allow people to share in cathartic and self-edifying experience of pain and destruction. Mark Steven argues that in 'splatter' films, it is corporeal mutilation that delivers the subversive and critical message, and that 'antagonistic subjectivity belongs to the excluded'.[54] Palahniuk's excessive and violent texts, like so-called splatter films, or horror, make a similar point, that the heroes of these fictions are the victims of postmodern capitalism, thus a potent anti-capitalist critique emerges in the negative, self-destructive actions of society's victims.

To reiterate, *Haunted* and *Fight Club* give a perverse credibility to self-destruction and the disobedient community. As I argue below, they present a host of rebellious and sometimes monstrous outsider groups who disavow any notion of the conventionally acceptable to regain a sense of control (or to accept the lack of control and meaning) as a pathway toward a desired modicum of freedom within their lives.

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[52] Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity,* p. 13.
[53] Matthews, *Ethics and Desire*, p. 22.
[54] Steven, *Splatter Capital,* p. 15.

Through a shared embrace of pathology, pain and self-harm, the individuals and communities within the two novels engage in activities and fantasies that go beyond conventional transgression in their undermining of acceptable models of conduct. In so doing, they force an unflinching existential re-evaluation of behavioural and ethical codes that empowers a broader sense of agency, subjectivity and community, opposed to the dissociated, alienated and narrow (or limited) subjectivities, cultivated in postmodern and neoliberal culture and society. This chapter continues by reading death, community and transgression in these novels to elucidate or posit an alternative to the twin threat of existential despair and neoliberal subjugation through communal acts of self-destruction and self-sacrifice. Drawing parallels with the philosophy of Maurice Blanchot in particular, I foreground the ways in which Palahniuk's novels respond to death as a shared experience that incites a re-evaluation of oneself within the traumatic contemporary cultural scenes described. Here transgression and (the relationship or engagement with) death are central in the formation of outsider communities in *Fight Club* and *Haunted*. Moreover, the excessive and self-destructive actions described (such as violent self-harm, murder and the retreat from or destruction of wider society) throughout these novels articulate critical responses to, and speculative modes of escape from, the capitalist (realist) socio-cultural trap. In what follows I examine the perverse and sublime confrontation with death (particularly as witnessed in *Fight Club*) and align this to the formation of radical and extreme communities. Secondly, I examine the extent to which the community in *Haunted* pushes a disconcerting form of self-destruction that foregrounds Palahniuk's satiric response to contemporary society. As reality is undermined and negated through self-sacrificial, communal activities, I conclude that the shared embrace of corporeal disintegration, pain and the fantasy of death in these novels negates the cynicism of contemporary culture and instigates an unflinching re-evaluation of subjective authenticity.

Fight Club and the Confrontation with Death

The awareness of and confrontation with death, be it literal or abstract (or one's own or that of an other), is the constant that underpins *Haunted* and *Fight Club*. Literary critics like Maurice Blanchot and to a certain extent, Georges Bataille, refuted a sense

of community built on the concealment of this foundational experience. Similarly, they were opposed to cultural or political order which sought to control the encounter with finitude and death through dogmatism, religiosity or by making such confrontations culturally taboo. Death, discussed in this section, is valued as an abstract fantasy which denotes both a corporeal and metafictional destruction of oneself. For Bataille and Blanchot death is not necessarily the end of life in reality, but an annihilation of the philosophical parameters that limit ourselves and our relation to the other:

> Without free loss, without expense of energy, no collective existence, or even individual existence is possible. Consequently, as human beings we cannot live without breaking the barriers we must give to our need to expend, barriers that look no less frightening than death.[55]

The confrontation with death foregrounds destruction and disobedience in *Fight Club* and undermines the moral fabric on which society is built. In turn, contravention and transgression follow to disrupt the dissatisfying sense of being that is initially felt by the narrator and his alter-ego, Tyler Durden. In terms of inciting a moment of catharsis or existential clarity in the individual, Marla's reaction to her confrontation with pain and death at the support groups is instructive. For Marla, before the support groups 'there was no real sense of life because she had nothing to contrast it with' and paradoxically, the confrontation with 'terror and remorse' culminates in an exhilarating reaffirmation of herself wherein she now 'feels every moment of her life' as valuable.[56] More forthcoming in her bleak and subversive outlook than the narrator, Marla states: 'I embrace my own festering diseased corruption,' further highlighting her sense of acceptance towards the horror of existence. Indeed, Marla's philosophy towards life 'is that she can die at any moment. The tragedy of her life is that she doesn't' and this sense of existential angst rubs off on the narrator who, through projects like fight club, seeks to ascertain some modicum of control over the fantasy and experience of death.[57] This sense of existential clarity or cathartic and affirming moment provided in the confrontation and experience of the body's destruction is significant in the subsequent formation of the fight club.

Throughout *Fight Club* and Project Mayhem, and *Haunted's* Writers' Retreat, Palahniuk's characters either reject the dominant/hegemonic culture or seek to

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[55] Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share,* vol. 1, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone, 1991 [1967]), p. 123.

[56] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 38.

[57] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 65.

instigate a change in their lives in the wake of it. *Fight Club* is marked by its anti-capitalist and even totalitarian and terroristic experiments in Project Mayhem, whilst *Haunted* is notable for its chaotic experiments in communal living. Bewes describes postmodern political and cultural reality as a 'fetish game of abstract "truths"' in which the pathological response of society is to 'turn a blind eye to the real terrors generated by postmodernism's projection beyond existing limits and its necessarily violent procedures'.[58] The cynicism that supposedly restricts protagonists in their contemporary postmodern existence is overcome as transgression and destruction are legitimized as a satirical response in the wake of widespread frustration through the community. The difference between Palahniuk's extreme communities and those failed attempts of the 1960s to which Critchley referred to earlier is that Palahniuk's extreme communities do not necessarily deny reality or retreat in favour of a whole new utopian, didactic context. They seek to construct an alternative reality from a fraught position within the cracks and marginal spaces of neoliberal and postmodern culture. In fact, as exemplified in the support groups, fight clubs and lastly, Project Mayhem, the foregrounding of death and destruction, affect and certainty, as the basis for community in many ways makes these communities even more committed to reality than the utopian, illusory and/or nihilistic systems of postmodernism and neoliberalism.

'If the community is revealed by death of the other person', states Blanchot in his readings of Bataille, then:

> It is because death is itself the true community of mortal beings: their impossible communion. The community therefore occupies the following singular space: It takes upon itself the impossibility of its own immanence, the impossibility of a communitarian being as subject […] a community is the presentation of its members with their mortal truth.[59]

Death is a great leveller; it is the shared experience from which community is born. Its state of importance is reflected by the narrator of *Fight Club* when he morbidly describes the sense of freedom and connection that he experiences at support groups. 'Losing all hope was freedom' and every meeting offers the opportunity to completely come out of or vacate oneself, to die and to be reborn.[60] Tyler Durden also urges the narrator of *Fight Club* to accept pain as a requisite for an alternative outlook on life. In one scene, whilst giving the narrator a chemical burn, Tyler decries that 'this is the

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[58] Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity,* pp. 7–8.
[59] Blanchot, *Unavowable Community,* pp. 10–11
[60] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 22.

greatest moment of our life', urging the narrator to 'come back to the pain'.[61] The fantasy, experience and embrace of ever more sublime self-destructive activities empower the individual and the community, releasing and freeing them from any presupposed ties that otherwise hold them back in an increasingly nihilistic real world they feel they have no stake in. Palahniuk describes the importance of death in formulating a life-affirming outlook and bond between characters when he states that 'in *Fight Club* the groups showed up to create life by being present to imminent death'.[62] Making a similar point, Giles argues that the narrator is demonstrably inspired by Tyler Durden to believe that death and self-destruction 'will enable him to find a renewed vitality and thus transcend both death and (…) his "tiny" life'.[63] While Giles is right in his articulation of Durden's influential position as antagonist to the narrator, I would add that self-destruction is firstly inspired by the narrator's relationship with the support groups which present death as something sublime and appealing. The support groups are significant in *Fight Club* in that they introduce the narrator to a model community which faces up to traumas of disease and 'the amazing miracle of death' that are otherwise socially and culturally taboo or relegated to the margins or underground.[64]

These support groups present a world that is stripped of all cultural illusions and instead is singularly focused on the very-real experiences of pain, disease and ultimately death which bond human beings. The narrator's attraction to such groups reflects an attraction to the experience of a stripped-back, essentialist and 'real' world, where individuals are united by shared universal concerns. In confronting death, both in the abstract of his own imagined death, and in the real by sharing in the experience with those suffering terminal illnesses, the narrator becomes intoxicated in the sublime effects and experience of pain and community. The result of this is a subsequent and forthright rejection of concern in the neoliberal cultural-reality and a renegotiation of his own identity. Self-sacrifice within these groups (i.e. the figurative opening up of oneself, sharing one's own trauma and suffering with the group) presents the chance for self-actualization and social bonding. The engagement with death and community

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[61] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, pp. 74–5.
[62] Chuck Palahniuk and Dan Epstein, 'Fighting Fit: An Interview with Chuck Palahniuk', *3 AM Magazine* (December 2001) <http://www.3ammagazine.com/litarchives/2001_dec/interiew_chuck_palahniuk.html> [accessed 17 November 2016].
[63] Giles, 'Violence, Spaces', p. 25.
[64] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 35.

negates the narrator's sense of being another nameless and aimless cog in the cycle of corporate work and consumerist expenditure. Instead, it replaces this inherent lack of purpose with a feeling of belonging and a better understanding of the existential predicament experienced beyond the postmodern, neoliberal world.

Despite the narrator's infiltration into groups for brain parasites, blood parasites, leukaemia and cancer, for example, his admission is predicated on the lie that he suffers like the other members. Whilst he is an insomniac, he is not terminally ill and death is not imminent in the same way as it is for the likes of the ever-suffering Chloe who is dying from brain parasites. What excites him about attending these groups is the openness and faithfulness that those closest to death exhibit. Conversely, what distresses him to the point of emotional closure, inhibiting his ability to cry or sleep, is the presence of Marla, another 'faker', whose infiltration of the community subsequently undermines it. 'Marla's lie reflects [his own] lie', he admits and goes on as follows:

> And all I can see are lies. In the middle of their truth. Everyone clinging and risking to share their worst fear, that their death is coming head on and the barrel of a gun is pressed against the back of their throats. Well, Marla is smoking and rolling her eyes, and me, I'm buried under a sobbing carpet, and all of a sudden even death and dying rank right down there with plastic flowers on video as a non-event.[65]

Despite the narrator's affection for the support groups and the sense of affirmation that the confrontation with death provides, the groups soon lose their effect when their integrity is challenged. Marla's inauthenticity reflects and underlines his own precarious position within the community which ultimately shuts him down emotionally and turns any sense of catharsis that the encounter with death supplied to him null and void. While other members of the community do not know it, his lie irreconcilably occludes him from attaining a fuller sense of solidarity and belonging that he desires from these groups. He perceives himself a 'tourist' or an outsider who fetishises death and pain as the sublime harbingers of a more authentic and existential or realistic (in the sense of an incitement of an emotive or affective lived experience) understanding of the world and himself. In response, and with the help of Tyler Durden, he is driven toward the establishment of his own underground community wherein the participants are linked by the shared experience of a perceived trauma inherent in being male

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[65] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 23.

within a nihilistic, neoliberal culture – a suffering which he invariably and authentically experiences.

The fight clubs themselves have been described as 'morbid cult(s) of violence in which identities are reduced down to their carnal state'.[66] The fight club is more accurately read as an active nihilist community, an affirmative community that rebels against the terrifying semblances of consumer culture and a pronounced sense of emasculation on the part of the modern male subject within neoliberal society. Throughout the novel it is evident that the threat of emasculation and the crisis of masculinity emerge as a key source of angst for the retreating male subjects as it is primarily the male body – increasingly bruised, marked and undermined by illness and exhaustion – that becomes the site against which the violence's and pressures of neoliberal society are manifest and which is sacrificed in opposition to the system. The males attracted to the fight club and then recruited into Project Mayhem are often those who pronouncedly feel the most alienated, left behind, emasculated or abused by neoliberal culture. In light of this, Tyler's (and the narrator's) fight club is a radical and problematic group that initially suspends the terrors of an outside capitalist world of perceived hegemonic and cultural violence against male self-worth through the nihilistic acts and fantasies of destruction. The social alienation that the fight club's participants feel is, for Matthews, 'transformed from a position of subordination into affirmation' precisely through the radical abnegation of what is deemed socially acceptable and a retreat into transgressive fantasy. The scene wherein a particularly frustrated narrator fights and destroys a newcomer at fight club is instructive here. When he chooses to fight 'the beautiful mister angel face' he does so to satisfy a growing need to completely destroy something beautiful in self-affirming realisation of his own raging innate desires.[67] In *Fight Club*, destruction and the horrific manipulation of the bodily form are intrinsically linked to both affirmation and self-destruction. When pummelling mister angel face, the narrator projects his fears, anxieties and frustrations related to his growing sense of emasculation and antipathy against his uneventful and meaningless white-collar existence onto a site which he can totally dominate. The fact that he 'waned to destroy everything beautiful [he would] never have' and 'wanted the whole world to hit bottom', emphasises precisely the shift from subservience and anger

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[66] Matthews, *Ethics and Desire*, p. 60.
[67] Palahniuk, *Fight Club,* p. 123.

against a world wherein he cannot achieve the status desired (whether economically or subjectively) to a spiteful affirmation or realisation of his own power through violence.[68] This shift culminates in the assertion that 'this is my world now' and the only necessary step towards its realisation, it would seem, is the relinquishment of control.[69] This is further emphasised in the unabated violence of his attack against mister angel face and the self-destructive abandonment or transgression of any remaining affinity to the cultural and moral coordinates of postmodern society, or the will to affect 'the complete and right-away destruction of civilization'.[70]

As a number of critics including Melissa Iocco have suggested, the fight club is borne out of a desire for homosocial bonding wherein men to reconnect with each other and with themselves in respite to contemporary culture that has had a 'deadening and numbing' and degenerative effect on the subject.[71] This sense of fundamental disappointment is articulated in the narrator's cynical outlook on his own meaningless, transient life which is recalled when he muses on the pointlessness and futility of everyday activities.[72] Instead of obsessing over the artificial trappings of consumer culture in never-ending pursuit to live up to a 'perfect' and 'complete' role in the world, those who seek meaning, purpose and destruction in the fight clubs do so as a means of fostering imperfection and subverting society's satisfactory models of behaviour.[73] They do so through a masochistic interpretation of the principles of support groups, wherein they may each confront, contest and experience pain and their own mortality and seek pleasure in their self-negation. As the narrator puts it, '[w]ho guys are in fight club is not who they are in the real world'.[74] Participants do not seek wanton destruction, but a destruction of themselves that allows the individual subject and the group at large the opportunity to feel more human and recast themselves as persons who are not their job title or the figure on their bank statements, and most importantly, who are not alone. One's inclusion into fight club is based only on their demonstrable commitment to the rules, but also a commitment to the transgression of the rule (the negation of the acceptable or real-world limitations)

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[68] Palahniuk, *Fight Club,* p. 123.
[69] Palahniuk, *Fight Club,* p. 124.
[70] Palahniuk, *Fight Club,* p. 125.
[71] Melissa Iocco, 'Addicted to Affliction: Masculinity and Perversity in *Crash* and *Fight Club*', *Gothic Studies,* 9:1 (2007), 46–56 (p. 49).
[72] Palahniuk, *Fight Club,* p. 49.
[73] Palahniuk, *Fight Club,* p. 46.
[74] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 49.

which reflects Bataille's informed argument that transgression is constitutive of society. This is most evident in that 'the first rule of Fight Club is: You do not talk about Fight Club', yet the underground movement spreads by word of mouth, a consequence of the necessary and repeated transgressions of the first rule.

This idea of commitment to the community is, however, abused as the latter mutates under the leadership of Tyler Durden into a highly problematic anarchist cult that no longer operates on communitarian principles or towards a goal of masochistic self-actualization. Project Mayhem and its members are initially bonded through the shared experience of death which underpins community. After his death, Robert Paulson (the closest to an actual friend for the narrator) is mourned as the sacrificial victim who has given himself up for others. This is not dissimilar to the sacrifice called upon by Bataille's understanding of *Eroticism*, in which the sacrifice is a sacred and alleviating excess that necessitates an 'assenting to life up to the point of death'.[75] Here, the narrator describes how in every fight club crowds of men, standing in darkness, engage in a ritualistic lamentations for the deceased Robert Paulson who, in death, has achieved heroic status within the community.[76]

The relationship between Paulson's death and the community recalls also the Other which Blanchot describes as that which urgently calls oneself into question:

> What, then, calls me into question most radically? Not my relation to myself as finite or as the consciousness of being before death or for death, but my presence for another who absents himself by dying. To remain present in the proximity of another who by dying removes himself definitively, to take upon myself another's death as the only death that concerns me, this is what puts me beside myself, this is the only separation that can open me, in its very impossibility, to the Openness of a community.[77]

While Paulson's death is accidental, it is also in a sense incidental as he, like the other members, has given himself up to the group and 'the effort' already after their 're-birth' in the pits of fight club. His actual death only confirms his own fidelity to Tyler's (and Project Mayhem's) cause and philosophy. In a perverse sense every member is 'Robert Paulson' because they have shared his experience as part of the community and so his death symbolically reflects that of each member who has also given

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[75] Bataille, *Eroticism*, p. 11; see also: Botting, 'After Transgression', p. 40.
[76] Palahniuk, *Fight Club,* p. 178.
[77] Blanchot, *Unavowable Community,* p. 9.

themselves to Tyler. The death of Paulson should be read as the sacrifice that is central to the social bond that links members of project mayhem to one another. However, there is also something more sinister underpinning the communities in *Fight Club,* something which should be approached as a kind of inversion that foregrounds Palahniuk's satire of contemporary neoliberal society and culture.

Simon Critchley argues that the contemporary era is a dark one, characterised by the common experience of political disappointment and coercion. While he is pessimistic about socio-political systems and their negative effects in regards to secular and ethical ideals, Critchley remains optimistic about the human communal and collective responses to them, particularly when communities act in committed, anarchic and ethical ways against state interventions.[78] In light of this, however, a clear problem arises when we consider the effect and implication of Project Mayhem as a measure of critique against neoliberal frameworks and as a vehicle for ethical social revolution or the affirmation of the human/community. Project Mayhem and its megalomaniac leader, Tyler Durden, lack a fundamental sense of ethical or communitarian, political understanding.[79] Project Mayhem's community is built around the singularity of the *one,* almost tyrannical voice. Rather than addressing the distinct, ethical concerns of individual members and the multiple voices within the community, members serve Tyler both on his production lines (manufacturing high-quality soaps and explosives) and on the front line of his violent assault against corporations and the march of history. In this, Project Mayhem reasserts the experience of political disappointment and pessimism as Tyler's populist brand of anti-politics further exacerbates the reduction of the subject in an undoing of the hope underpinning the fight clubs and support groups which preceded it.

This 'community' subsumes individuals in much the same way the society from which the narrator seeks to flee does. Tyler Durden's 'community' now profits precisely through the iron-fisted corroding of the identities and freedoms of its members just as neoliberal and postmodern society profits from a similarly insidious and manipulative reification of subjects into narrow and dejected tools for capital accumulation and

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[78] Simon Critchley and Jull Stauffer, 'Simon Critchley, interviewed by Jull Stauffer' *Believer Magazine,* 1:5 (2002) <http://www.believermag.com/issues/200308/?read=interview_critchley> [accessed 17 November 2016].

[79] By this, I refer in part to Critchley's consideration of desirable politics as a commitment to fluid interactions between individuals based on a shared ethical intention against hegemonic socio-political frameworks, rather than, say, a politics of state.

consumerism. Despite their running away from a life of work and drudgery in the outside world, the recruits of Project Mayhem — 'Space Monkeys' — are represented as disempowered, desubjectified and even narrower beings who undertake laborious tasks under Tyler's hierarchical corporate framework, the only difference being they work to supplement Tyler's demagogic status, rather than for a wage. To the narrator's dismay, the community he sought has now all but evaporated as he describes how his house – now reminiscent of a soap factory – 'is filled with strangers that Tyler has accepted'.[80] This inversion can be read as a satirical commentary on how libertarian and communal values have been usurped by the singular and totalitarian vision of neoliberal hegemony and postmodern mass culture. Additionally, it also furthers the sense of mistrust felt towards any alternative that claims to work on behalf of or 'for' the 'people'. Here, the 'space monkeys' have cast off one organised state/hegemonic power or another and this foregrounds the notion that power always falls prey to corruption and abuses that necessarily results in oppression. However, as Naomi Mandel points out, what began in Palahniuk's fiction as a 'quest for self-certainty through violence morphs into the menace of organized religion, corporate culture, and terror'.[81] Rather than giving expressive license to anarchy as a means of renegotiating the self and negating the conditions of existence that cause so much discontent, transgression leads to a totalitarian uniformity amongst the 'space monkeys' who can do nothing for themselves, but only act out Tyler's will. Tyler Durden spoils the liberating confrontation with death, as it transforms from the bond that commits individuals to one another in a positive way to the only viable sense of relief from a Durden-inspired repressive mass culture, or as the novel states, 'only in death do we have names', 'only in death are we no longer part of Project Mayhem'.[82]

Through fidelity to the transgressive community and to death, the individual finds some semblance of an alternative society to that of the traumatic capitalist realist/postmodern scenario as portrayed throughout Palahniuk's fiction. In this way, *Fight Club* becomes a politically transgressive text as well as a grotesque critique of the contemporary culture moment as it delineates a politically motivated, or wholly anti-political, model for social disengagement and rebellion. In similar recognition of

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[80] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 130.
[81] Mandel, *Disappear Here,* p. 181.
[82] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, pp. 200–1.

the counter-political implication of transgressive writing, Blanchot viewed the controversial Marquis de Sade as:

> The political writer *par excellence* because his conception of cold creation and destruction is that of a political order in which total freedom – the freedom of the revolution – is also the freedom of the instantaneous, unmediated negation of all that exists.[83]

Sade wrote against state and institution in pursuit of a total freedom of self, at whatever the cost. As it is, the processes of Project Mayhem and Tyler Durden each corresponds with de Sade's unmediated negation and repudiation of all that exists. As Tyler states, Project Mayhem 'had nothing to do with *other* people', 'Tyler didn't care if other people got hurt or not', only that they were free from the constraints of the hegemony he vociferously denounces.[84] Despite the narrator's hopes that Tyler would 'deliver' him 'from Swedish furniture', the trappings of a consumer lifestyle, as well as from a postmodern cultural propulsion towards 'being perfect and complete', his 'revolution' does not match up to the Marquis' model of instantaneous or unmediated negation of reality. Nor does Tyler's deliverance lead to a Sadean scene of pleasures unbound or to a revolutionary and anarchic total freedom or radical disturbance of hegemony.[85]

Project Mayhem's corruption of this intention confirms a similar concern to the one Critchley articulates regarding the effect or validity of those revolutionary communal experiments steeped in didacticism or a cult of personality. Critchley argues that such radical, communal projects ultimately fail because they lack the ability to mediate between individuals and factions that are necessary in social bonding and community building. As described so far, the fight clubs worked on a shared ethical premise that all are equal (anyone, for example, could pick a fight with anyone) and that all have the right to peruse a sense of affirmation and freedom and to enjoy their moment of power. By contrast, in Project Mayhem attendees are only equal in that they are nameless, stripped of any sense of selfhood and relegated to a position below that of Tyler who dictates and controls them with a virulent will and destructive intent. Project Mayhem thus fails to deliver on the promise of an empowering, transgressive sect that would present a radical dialectical challenge to the system it was born in

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[83] Allan Stoekl, 'Blanchot, Death, Language, Community and Politics', *Parallax* 12:2 (2006), 40–52 (p. 41).
[84] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 122. Emphasis added.
[85] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 46.

resistance to. Instead, Project Mayhem comes to resemble little more than a satirical hybrid of an anarchic paramilitary group, an effective corporate enterprise and the absolute corruption of radical, transgressive intent.

While a facade of community remains in Project Mayhem, the group is not about men reshaping or formulating broader identities, connections and freedom, or alleviating the pressures of the real world. Instead, their joint efforts cater only to fulfilling Tyler's nihilistic desire for violence and terrorism against the world to 'save humanity by destroying it'.[86] Even more troubling is that, through Project Mayhem, members become subjectively narrower and more vacuous. Submitting fully to Tyler's will (as per the second and fifth rule of Project Mayhem), they are shaped ever-more by a variation on the repressive mass cultures they retreat and their lives become singularly bound in opposition to the capitalist world.[87] The tragedy here is that those searching for community in 'Remaining Men Together' and latterly in fight club (in search of something primal, meaningful, or as a coping mechanism for their disappointing lives and their own traumatic mortality) have become stripped of their selfhood, authenticity and any radical and desired sense of control within Tyler's totalitarian anarchist group. As the likes of Thacker, Benatar and Ligotti confirm, ours is an era where pessimism – or philosophical and/or material disenchantment – pervades and alternatives to the existential predicament and the socio-political conditions of neoliberal hegemony seem glaringly absent. It is typical of this pessimistic scenario that groups, such as Project Mayhem, which attempt to organise and mobilise disaffection into a cultural and political protest, often collapse. For Critchley, such groups '[are] doomed to fail', and despite the radical potential of the radical/transgressive collective, these groups (identifiably those dependant on some manipulative figure of extreme authority) often end up subverting or betraying their initial 'collective' purpose, only further adding to a widespread cultural cynicism, resignation or antipathy.[88]

Extreme communities, bonded in their retreat from and destructive undoing of culture's negative effect on the individual and society, as *Fight Club* demonstrates, are problematic. On the one hand, they often successfully manage to formulate a desirable

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[86] Mandel, *Disappear Here,* p. 182.
[87] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 125.
[88] Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless*, p. 123.

and affirmative ethical alternative to a repressive mass culture through their active pursuit of pain and disaster. On the other, they often suffer the fate of becoming even-more perverse and repressive entities themselves in the process of shifting the emphasis from 'multiple singularities' within a clearly articulated sociality to an ordered, 'fighting collectivity'. Tyler's strength is his ability to mobilize and manipulate the desire for community through a sublime and attractive engagement with the fantasy of death (whether subjective or cultural) and transgression. The communal desire for and turn to disobedience, primarily through self-destruction, is an affirmative tactic central also to Palahniuk's later novel, *Haunted*. In what follows I will concentrate more specifically on the extent to which the extreme community depicted in *Haunted* becomes a vehicle for a radical self-destruction that expressly foregrounds Palahniuk's critique and satiric response to contemporary society. In *Haunted,* as in *Fight Club,* each moment experienced by Palahniuk's characters 'foreshadow[s] the real horror of the next', as there is no respite or alternative to the sense of terror that overcomes the individual subject in his/her everyday life.[89] Like *Fight Club, Haunted* presents us with a paradoxical, flawed and unethical version of community led by a supposedly enlightened, antithetical Durden-esque figure of opposition and superiority, whose disposition toward control ultimately undermines the purity of his transgressive vision. However, through closer examination of *Haunted,* we can further clarify and demonstrate how self-destruction is pursued and differs from the apocalyptic demands of Tyler Durden in *Fight Club.* Instead, *Haunted* plays with the idea of self-destruction as a liberating and redemptive issue, citing the refusal/negation of the real world and retreat into the outsider community as an authentic, inner experience in which identities are deconstructed and freedom (in disobedience) is sought.

Disobedience and Self-Control in *Haunted*

A transgression is, as Chris Jenks argues, an excessive or satiric mobilization of agency that demonstrates the '(re)integration of potential militancy in a dispossessed, privatized, and alienated socius'.[90] Like *Fight Club, Haunted* is a quintessential transgressive narrative of self-destruction, an examination of the tensions and conflict

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[89] Palahniuk, *Haunted,* p. 136.
[90] Jenks, *Transgression*, p. 6.

between the subject and culture wherein '[y]ou, [are] the victim of yourself'.[91] Levinas' claims that anarchy 'is consciousness, where being is lost and found again'.[92] In the novel, anarchy, disobedience and (self-)destruction are mobilized to reverse the dispossession and alienation that has been suffered by attendees of a writer's retreat. Violence, self-destruction and death (literal and abstract) are a means of contesting limits, mediating life (and death) experiences and of challenging the neoliberal culture that obfuscates the reality of our own latent existential trauma. Laurie Vickroy contends that *Fight Club* demonstrates the extent to which the dissociated neoliberal world, 'blind to the consequences of its destructive action, creates a deeply isolated protagonist who longs for attachments'.[93] The same can also be inferred through the reading of *Haunted,* in which through the construction of extreme communities, the novel foregrounds the corrosion of individual identities and freedoms both within mass culture and within the self-destructive community itself. Founded in response to cultural and political discontent, existential angst or social alienation, the communities within *Fight Club* and *Haunted* attempt to fill the void created by normative society's failure to articulate a viable alternative to postmodern and neoliberal socio-cultural misery. As the previous section demonstrated, the two novels are mediations on the confrontation with death that brings alienated individuals together and attempts a radical and nihilistic undoing of oneself in pursuit of a sense of agency or authenticity. This is not to say that these extreme communities necessarily succeed in articulating a viable political alternative. Instead, as I argue through my reading of *Haunted,* transgressive groups — who share an affirming experience of self-destruction and disobedience — speculatively explore the possibility for a new and satirical model of society that exists as counter to a damaging and cynical status quo.

For Palahniuk, hope is not to be found in the world, but in a coming together with others. In the introduction to *Non-Fiction,* Palahniuk defends his work: '[i]f you haven't already noticed, all my books are about a lonely person looking for some way to connect with other people. In a way, that is the opposite of the American Dream'.[94] It is a trait in his fiction that he commonly returns to and in one interview he develops this idea further, arguing that his books are 'always' concerned with the response to

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[91] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, p. 102.

[92] Emmanuel Levinas, 'Substitution', in *The Levinas Reader,* ed. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 88–125 (p. 91).

[93] Vickroy, 'Body Contact', pp. 62–3.

[94] Palahniuk, *Non-Fiction*, p. xi.

and transition from 'aloneness and isolation' to community and specifically, 'a denigrated community that is filthy and poor, but they are not alone'.[95] *Haunted* depicts the misadventures of a number of alienated characters who are running from society and mainstream American culture. But rather than retreat into a subjective or solitary isolation, they seek a sense of resolution or alternative through community. Such individuals find themselves on the margins of society, seeking some kind of solace, not only in others, but also in radical attempts to reshape the parameters of their existence through violence, transgression, embracing death and in rewriting themselves. Palahniuk describes this retreat or undoing of the American cultural psyche as significant, as support groups and outsider communities serve to allow humans to:

> [R]eveal the worst aspects of ourselves, our sins. To tell our stories. To be recognized. […] And to be redeemed, accepted back into our community. […] and to resolve our anxiety before it could take us so far from humanity that we would be lost.[96]

In *Fight Club,* we are introduced to members of various support groups like Robert 'Big Bob' Paulson and Chloe, who, with their terminal illnesses, struggle to find a place or live normal lives within society. For 'Big Bob', this is reflected in the total collapse of his family life and career as a bodybuilder after testicular cancer, and for Chloe it is reflected in her struggles for any kind of human intimacy whatsoever following her experience suffering from brain parasites. In *Haunted* this is felt as the transgressive protagonists capture the underlying mood in the theatre, asking '[d]oesn't it seem like we're all hiding out from something?'[97]

In *Haunted* extremity and excess are the preserve of the outsider community as they set to recast themselves with agency and to subvert the material and existential conditions of the reality they have each rejected. Those in the novel who have retreated from the world do so for a number of reasons, not least of which is fleeing from disappointment at the way their lives have turned out, where not from death itself. Lady Baglady, a wealthy socialite who pretends to be homeless in a problematic game of poverty-tourism, claims to be hiding out from a gang who are

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[95] Sean O'Hagan and Chuck Palahniuk, 'Fright Club: Interview with Chuck Palahniuk', *The Guardian Online* (8 May 2005) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/may/08/fiction.chuckpalahniuk> [accessed 17 November 2016].

[96] Palahniuk*, Non-Fiction,* p. xix.

[97] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, p. 289.

murdering the homeless as they try to get rid of witnesses to a previous crime. Agent Tattletale (a private investigator who often manufactures evidence against those who claim disability benefit) purports to be hiding out from the revenge of those he has spied on. The Duke of Vandals hides from a murderous art racket to whom, as a result of some Faustian pact, he owes his career and fame; and Mother Nature hides from the Russian Mafia. Rather than simply to escape death, for each of the attendees an underlying sense of disenchantment or pessimism over a particular aspect of the postmodern world they flee can be discerned in their enthusiasm for the writer's retreat. Miss America's motivation, for example, is underpinned by a forthright rejection of the iconocentrism and materialism of the TV industry she was a part of and Lady Baglady's motivation reveals an inherent and veiled critique of a society wherein economic stability and wealth is supposedly a requisite to self-fulfilment and happiness. To stem the tide of despair in a world both without hope or practical alternative (for many of the attendees, previously murder, corruption and violence were their only weapon against troubling factors), they make the decision to reassume control via a deferral of the outside world and the (self)destruction and subsequent re-manufacturing of themselves and their stories on their own terms. As Bruhm argues, extremity 'actually gives [characters] a language, a way of expressing the impotence [they] secretly feared'.[98] The writer's retreat becomes, for the retreating subject, a space in which through expressive and violent excess they may retaliate against themselves, culture and attempt to confront and resolve the anxieties and disturbances that have led them towards seclusion.

Haunted is an interesting mediation of how death, disobedience and narrative (and the written or spoken word) are intertwined. Each of the twenty-three short horror stories featured are brought together within a frame narrative which at first glance reads as the collective attempt by the attendees to tell 'the story of Us'. However, the narrative itself is a curious proposition in that 'the narrator does not exist' and this destabilizes the text as it appears composed 'by everyone […] and yet, as a result of some sleight of hand […] by none of them'.[99] What is evident is that the narrative and the characters' stories, once committed to the page, forego the storytellers themselves

[98] Steven Bruhm, 'The Epistemology of the Tortured Body', in *Gothic Bodies: The Politics of Pain in Romantic Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1994), 94–119 (p. 113).

[99] Christopher Priest, 'Beating a Retreat', *The Guardian Online* (11 June 2005) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/jun/11/fiction.chuckpalahniuk> [accessed 17 November 2016].

who become grotesque caricatures, puppets, manoeuvred by a seemingly more nefarious narrator behind the scenes who is accomplice to the disobedience and destruction wrought. What *Haunted* offers*,* therefore, is a strange kind of community in which attendees self-destructively abandon and/or sacrifice themselves, 'gambling' little bits of themselves in order to give life to their creation which seemingly takes over.[100] The story here literally consumes the self-sacrificing teller.

For Maurice Blanchot, the literary word is central to the idea of self-undoing in that to give a name to something is, conversely, to demarcate its absence and to threaten the possibility of its non-existence, or as he says, to annihilate it.[101] According to Francisco Collado-Rodriguez:

> all fiction written by Palahniuk so far, is also about the power of writing as a viable alternative to the passive life lived by the servants of the simulated reality. Not surprisingly, Palahniuk has confessed in a number of interviews and his non-fiction that writing […] has the power to offer a way out of our present commodified society.[102]

Similarly, Mr. Whittier reflects both Blanchot's and Palahniuk's belief in the amazing power of words and stories. Some stories, he states, 'you tell them and you use them up', whilst '[o]ther stories . . . […] Whittier gestures at our skin and bones'.[103] The implication here is that they affect the subject or grant the subject body and form. *Haunted's* narrative articulates the psychological and somatic effects that words can have on individuals and groups: an effect of physical reaction, of violence and of psychological and corporeal nullification and death. In addition, Mr. Whittier's transgressive language reveals a desire to annihilate boundaries to enable his followers to engage with repressed emotions of pain, loss and death, and impart their own alternative, antithetical, vision of the world. This relationship between death and self-expression, prevalent in earlier novels such as *Lullaby* (2002)*, Diary* (2003) and *Survivor* (1999)*,* is also central to the formation of the community in *Haunted* as the condition of the attendees' confirmation into the group is to destroy their former selves and assume a new identity (as 'Saint Gut-Free', 'Comrade Snarky', 'The Missing Link', and so on) through self-mythologisation. As Mr. Whittier urges them to create their own horror stories, self-expression demonstrates a power to reduce and produce

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[100] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, p. 8.
[101] Maurice Blanchot, 'Literature and the Right to Death', in *The Work of Fire,* trans. by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 300–344 (pp. 322–3).
[102] Collado-Rodriguez, *Chuck Palahniuk*, p. 8.
[103] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, p. 380.

history and to annihilate or re-construct the subject as individual and community. In this way writing or storytelling becomes for *Haunted*'s protagonists, as it does for Blanchot, a form of resistance and, at its most extreme, culminates in the fatalistic negation of a nihilistic world outside of the theatre's walls.

The novel confers that the opening up of oneself, often to or for the pleasure of others, as opposed to the masochistic and gratuitous violence of *Fight Club*, poses a (modicum of) genuine 'resistance to nihilism' and a desired and tangible sense of possibility/positivity after destruction.[104] Through their repeated negative and satirical depictions of a nihilistic contemporary American culture and its incessant and insidious attacks on their person in their stories, these storytellers model themselves on the ideal of the 'anguished writer', who:

> [I]s called upon by his dread to perform a genuine sacrifice of himself. He must spend, he must consume, the forces that make him a writer. This spending must also be genuine. Either to be content with not writing any more, or to write a work in which all the values that the mind held in potential reappear in the form of effects, is to prevent the sacrifice from being made or to replace it by an exchange.[105]

This figure is lauded by Blanchot for a commitment to absolute self-sacrifice and to the impossible, and is precisely the kind of writer(s) which Mr. Whittier demands his attendees become.[106] His desire is for a community wherein which the participants are expected to ultimately remake themselves; to sacrifice, exploit and consume one another in pursuit of an alternative sense of being and agency otherwise denied in the real world, unlike Durden's demand for sacrifice in Project Mayhem that contributes to the destruction of the world. In *Haunted* their self-destruction appears to be nihilistic in the Nietzschean sense that is the prerequisite to the creation of 'a masterpiece that would buy [their] way out of slavery to a husband or parent or a corporation'.[107] One 'that would earn [their] freedom' within the space of neoliberal capitalist society.

Throughout *Haunted* the characters project their own fears and anxieties about death, the loss of a child ('Cassandra'), sexual desire and taboo ('Guts'), gender

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[104] Shane Weller, '"*Ce Mot Sec et Latin Par Surcroît*": Maurice Blanchot, Literature and Nihilism', *Modern Language Studies,* 44:3 (2008), 307–321 (p. 308).
[105] Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus, and other literary essays,* ed. by P Adams Sitney, trans. by Lydia Davis (New York: Station Hill, 1981), pp. 7–8.
[106] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, pp. 42; 60.
[107] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, p. 8.

issues ('Speaking Bitterness') and the loss of identity and commodification of the body ('Green Room'). They metaphorically 'put a ghost in the old theatre to build the story […], haunt this place [them]selves, pack it with lost souls'.[108] This process involves two things: firstly, an othering or dissociation from themselves which is evident in the self-destructive re-writing of themselves. The creation of pseudonymous character names based on lives, sins, faults and crimes is a means of exerting some sense of control over built-up traumas that have forced them to disengage with the real world.[109] They become props, persons made into objects, that are used and debased so as to implement the novel's satirical critique of contemporary culture and subjectivity.[110] Secondly, it involves a process of embracing or facing up to their own death and putting themselves beyond culture, 'reality' and/or an event that defined their previous life and which becomes a spectre or ghost to be confronted and exorcised. As Mr. Whittier tells them, 'You cannot be the person they know and the great, glorious person you want to become. Not at the same time'.[111] Death, in the abstract sense of destroying a previous self, is therefore necessary in order to move forwards or beyond a constrictive trauma, history or even reality and to achieve a sense of control on one's own terms. Mrs. Clark's stories to the group (particularly, 'The Nightmare Box', 'Poster Child' and 'Cassandra') are indicative of this, as she describes how the pain and trauma of her daughter's disappearance increased when, having returned abused and disfigured, Cassandra refuses to engage in any kind of therapeutic discourse with the community. Choosing not to acknowledge the suffering and pain that her disappearance caused, Cassandra becomes to a certain extent a monstrous and hated pariah within society, irrespective of her victimhood. Subsequently, the only way in which Mrs. Clark can move forwards after the inability to comprehend or rationalise the notion that her daughter removed herself from the community and mutilated herself voluntarily, is to murder her so that she can seek solace and the closure demanded by her own trauma of the event.[112] In this act, death – or the death of an other – becomes the catalyst for a life-changing and life-abandoning event for Mrs. Clark because it leads to her own subsequent desertion

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[108] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, pp. 84–5.
[109] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, p. 2.
[110] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, p. 403.
[111] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, p. 7.
[112] Palahniuk, *Haunted,* p. 353.

of wider society and retreat into Mr. Whittier's group, wherein she hopes to extrapolate meaning from, and rationalise, her daughter's self-destructive actions.

Whilst the inmates' stories demonstrate a commitment to voicing their angst and discontent and the creation of their outsider, micro-society, the ambiguity of the framing narrative is the cause of a distinct tension that destabilises and undermines each characters' supposed individual input (their short stories and voice within the frame narrative itself) as accurate renderings of events. The importance given to the relinquishment of self, control and acceptance of meaninglessness and self-destruction as a precondition of a more ideal life is something that Mr. Whittier eulogizes over to his attendees.[113] For Whittier, 'you are permanent, but life is not' and 'we're born here to suffer', the acceptance of this refrain becomes a requisite process enabling the attendees/survivors to endure or navigate the modern world.[114] Paradoxically, this is a mode of survival that is based on a perverse running towards and embrace of torture, pain and suffering which embodies and epitomises existential reality in the contemporary world as well as from it. The bonding of otherwise alienated subjects requires an annihilation of any sense of narcissistic individuality. In *Haunted,* however, the apparent narcissism of many of the attendees (who, as it transpires, seek to control the narrative and the unfortunate events therein for their own benefit) invites us to consider the self-destructive endgame of this community.

In *Haunted,* to ascertain a sense of freedom involves an element of sacrifice and desire to act in spite of or at pains to oneself for the benefit of community. Nonetheless, whilst attendees of the writer's retreat embrace the pain and suffering, they do so with a seemingly narcissistic intention which is to the detriment — rather than the redemption or salvation — of themselves individually and communally and so cannot be seen in the novel to succeed. Despite each participant's attempts to the contrary, as they try to out-do each other (to have the last say on the story), the community and collective transcends the individual who is ultimately consumed, destroyed or left in a further state of abjection as a result of their self-centred actions. As Palahniuk seeks to satirise the real world from which the writer's escape, he attacks and punishes them for their unremitting sense of narcissism. Throughout *Haunted* it is this characteristic (an underling feature of postmodern and neoliberal culture) that

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[113] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, pp. 201–5; 210–22.
[114] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, p. 103.

continually haunts the characters in their attempts to redeem themselves through writing. Against the narcissism of the contemporary individual, wherein one puts oneself above the group, Antonio Rocha describes the individual as being 'most authentic when he (or she) most opens up to the other in dialogue, building something different together'.[115] Through complaint and dialogue the characters seek to resolve their issues and establish their community:

> [B]y venting, people could start to resolve the past. By bitching and bitching and bitching, they could exhaust the drama of their own horror stories. Grow bored. Only then could they accept a new story of their lives. Move forward.[116]

Complaint and dialogue are subversive in that they foreground an undoing of a disappointing culture or society and allow subjects to move together in a new direction or to articulate a new and more authentic alternative. Moreover, the characters in *Haunted* repeatedly refer to this in their repetition of their feeling that they are rag-dolls (inauthentic, manufactured props, in the story) but who, when opened up through the telling stories or through the commitment to corporeal destruction and disobedience, reveal both their abnormality and their 'realness'.[117]

Throughout *Haunted,* the likes of Miss America, Chef Assassin, Saint Gut-Free and Mother Nature, embrace perversion and the distortion of reality and their 'realness' to emphasise their own suffering and in an attempt to control their version of events. Despite their traumatic relationships with the real world, the lived experience for the protagonists becomes an excessive and often tragi-comical event. The theatre setting in *Haunted* recalls Antonin Artaud's surrealist and experimental theatre of cruelty, which sought to shock and engross the audience in an aesthetic of chaos, degeneration and horror as a means of confronting unexpressed emotions that find no form of release in normative, everyday life.[118] Sidney Sondergard develops this link between Artaud and Palahniuk as demonstrative of the latter's intention to viscerally confront the escalating anxiety and sense personal or existential

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[115] Antonio Casado de Rocha, 'Disease and Community in Chuck Palahniuk's Early Fiction', *Stirrings Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature,* ed. by Erik M. Grayson, 2:2 (Fall/Winter, 2005), 105–115 (p. 113).
[116] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, p. 261.
[117] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, p. 403.
[118] Antonin Artaud, 'The Theatre of Cruelty (First Manifesto), in *The Theatre and Its Double,* trans. by Victor Corti (Richmond: Oneworld Classics, 2011 [1964]), 63–71.

doom that befalls his protagonists.[119] In his works developed in the early twentieth century, Artaud sought to express pain, destruction and trauma theatrically as he felt language insufficient. Palahniuk, instead, merges the transgressive dramaturgical expression of Artaud with an aggressive and satirical literary model that provocatively foregrounds the dramatic and affective aspects of the events described. This is particularly evident as the community in *Haunted* stage increasingly gory, destructive and carnivalesque scenes for the entertainment of their audience within a theatre space. Moreover, their self-aware production of cruelty against one another can be said to satirize and amalgamate the rise of the cult of celebrity which has coincided with the cultural fascination with, and rising popularity of, horror (particularly of a corporeal brand exemplified in the that of 'torture porn' or the 'slasher') and the desire to become the object of attention in western postmodern society: '[a]ll of us, we're aching for her to help make us famous'.[120] Within this situation the protagonists collectively shape their own 'self-denying narratives', as Sondergard terms them, in which 'truth' becomes a horrific and grotesque parody.[121] Or, more suitably, their reality becomes an excessive parody of an otherwise traumatic and unstable modern situation as individuals and events are constantly manipulated for one's own (or the community's) sadistic pleasures or gain. The death of the Matchmaker, for example, demonstrates this as the reaction of the group is to turn him into a prop in their subsequent story, exploiting his demise for communal gain, taking advantage of their situation and creating an 'incestuous orgy' of horror in order to appeal to the cultural fascination (and marketability) of grotesque spectacle.[122]

The Writers imprisoned by Mr. Whittier within this discernibly Gothic space embark on a journey of gruesome self-mutilation, macabre physical abuse and cannibalism in an attempt to humiliate their bodies and achieve a perverse sense of enlightenment. The group within *Haunted* externalise and exhibit their previously inner, psychological fragmentation as the body becomes the sight of conflict and trauma, whilst at the same time (in a satirical comment on contemporary cultural practices) they reclaim the body for their own economic gain within a materialist

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[119] Sidney L. Sondergard, 'Chuck Palahniuk and the Semiotics of Personal Doom: The Novelist as Escape Artist', in *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem,* ed. by Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Rubin (London: Routledge, 2009), 9–23 (pp. 9–10).
[120] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, p. 86.
[121] Sondergard, 'Palahniuk and the Semiotics of Personal Doom', p. 10.
[122] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, p. 358.

consumer society in which the body becomes a dehumanised commodity. Similarly, David Simmons and Nicola Allen argue that in reducing the status of the theatre's inhabitants 'to something reminiscent of farm animals, Palahniuk suggests that they have been debased by their own false desires'.[123] They respond by turning themselves into grotesque, sellable products for a postmodern consumer culture which revels in superficial displays of horror:

> "I'm always looking", says Miss America, "for what's NOT to like." […] "My every glance in a mirror, it's like a secret market survey." […] "For the Talent portion of my program," she says, "I'll show you how to unswallow." […] With a long-term goal of becoming someone's long-term investment, as a durable consumer good.[124]

When humans are reduced to commodities, as Sherry R. Truffin notes, they often 'respond by turning themselves into monsters'.[125] Through the mutilated and tortured bodies of characters such as Saint Gut-Free, who has his insides sucked out during a masturbation accident, Comrade Snarky who is butchered and has part of her body cooked and eaten as she lays unconscious and the Matchmaker who inadvertently commits suicide in a failed attempt to 'out-do' the rest of them through castration, Palahniuk critiques the superficial postmodern culture of constructed and commercialized violent excess. Furthermore, by becoming products of blood, torture and pain (in becoming scarred in their contempt for the normative values and sensibilities) the outsider community transcended reality together, becoming uncanny and grotesque replacements of their past human form: social outsiders and monsters whose self-worth, agency and value is based in their alterity from convention.

The community described throughout *Haunted* articulates a model of radical self-destruction that denies and undermines the individual in postmodern, neoliberal society and reality. Indeed, Slade points out that self-destruction, and the 'destruction of bodies through their mutilation' makes it possible to create 'new possibilities for value, identity, in short an authentic existence in a world which appears to have erased these possibilities'.[126] Nonetheless, the theatre space in which the community resides, is a space of confinement and entrapment as well as a site of escape from

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[123] David Simmons and Nicola Allen, 'Reading Chuck Palahniuk's *Survivor* and *Haunted* as a Critique of "The Culture Industry"', in *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem*, ed. by Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Rubin (London: Routledge, 2009), 116–128 (p. 125).
[124] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, pp. 46–7.
[125] Truffin, 'Palahniuk's Postmodern Gothic', p. 75.
[126] Slade, 'On Mutilation', p. 62.

the demeaning torments of reality – a space designed to 'exclude the outside reality'.[127] Only in this outsider or othered space can mutilation and self-destruction be cultivated 'as a practice of redemption and survival'.[128] Herein the members are enlisted to engage in transgressive actions of destruction in order to destroy, both, themselves and their surroundings so to remake themselves to the extent that it will provide a 'better', or more secure future within the real, or mainstream, world. The community not only takes the subject out of the real world in refuge, it provides a new world in which the traumatised and victimised can attempt to re-define themselves and regain control through the transgressive self-destruction and disobedience to cultural norms.

Throughout the novel, as in *Fight Club* as previously explored, self-destruction becomes a political gesture in which the shared concerns of a larger social body, their traumas and their anxieties, are confronted and mediated by the community. They do so through the embrace of self-destruction, here seen through violent and affective means of corporeal destruction, murder and suicide, and the literary and expressive re-writing of themselves as a pathway to authenticity. Within a world that offers little respite from discontent, suffering and trauma, as described in *Haunted*, the need for disobedient outsider communities that stand uninhibitedly apart from the mainstream or the acceptable is stark, as they offer the opportunity for a subject to retrospectively read, reinvent and redeem themselves. 'Even a killer needs to talk, to tell his life story', the Writers Retreat attendees agree, 'until the killer can convince himself with the story of his new reality'.[129] This is reflected in Critchley's response to Blanchot, wherein he contends that literature becomes a passage beyond the nihilism of everyday culture and society in which:

> The writer is no longer satisfied with the aesthetic pleasure of manipulating mere words, but wishes to realize writing in the world by negating something real, by annulling *everything* hitherto considered real: the state, the law, institutions, religion. Thus, writing comes to see itself as the mirror of *revolution*'.[130]

For this reason, Palahniuk's literary staging of self-destruction through the annihilating re-writing of oneself or through violence and the confrontation with death

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[127] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, p. 119.
[128] Slade, 'On Mutilation', p. 62.
[129] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, p. 137.
[130] Critchley, *Very Little…*, p. 50.

can be considered a radical experience. As it has been hitherto described, the outsider community provides a necessary site wherein disobedience and the self-aware confrontation with death on ones' own terms are allowed and (as per *Fight Club* and *Haunted*) this proves significant in advancing the subversive message of this fiction in which transgressive gestures provide a pathway towards the fulfilment of a more ethical society.

As Mr. Whittier states, 'until you can ignore your circumstances, and just do as you promise,' that is, to remain faithful to the desire for freedom from cultural and existential constraint, 'you'll always be controlled by the world'.[131] The terror and trauma of the outside world bonds the protagonists of *Haunted*, who literally come together to listen to each other's confessional stories. Their subsequent communal tolerance for, and engagement in, transgressive behaviour is a marked response to the conditions that instigated their individual and collective retreat from the outside world. In *Haunted,* as in *Fight Club,* characters' retreat from the impersonal and nihilistic postmodern world of alienating and claustrophobic false consciousness in which mental freedom, free-will and individuality are impossible. The attempt to reconcile these existential tensions (and the hitherto described material conditions of western neoliberal society) turns subjects to the outsider community, to an awareness of death and ultimately, to a transgressive disobedience that refuses to any longer accept the given state of things. Of the many terrors of postmodernity evident in Palahniuk's fiction, that which seems to most rile with the protagonists in these two novels is that of the plight of the individual who is systematically debased and reduced to a commodity within the neoliberal economy. In *Haunted* the systematic reduction and abuse of the neoliberal subject is countered by a procedural and grotesque manipulation of bodies. Such acts and fantasies of often self-destructive abuse also exemplify the increasing necessity of violent and perverse of methods of response against equally violent and destructive contemporary cultural and economic practices and thought-processes. As communities turn to self-destruction they not only confront the imminence of death (which, as previously discussed, forms the criteria of a better-functioning communal society), they also undermine the moral criteria of acceptable behaviour within society. In doing so *Haunted* and *Fight Club* foreground self-destruction as a disobedient and radical alternative that negotiates the tensions

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[131] Palahniuk, *Haunted*, p. 44.

between individual and mass society and plays a significant role in the formulation of a more ethical communal reaction to neoliberal and postmodern world from which the characters each retreat.

Conclusion

The move towards often insular and extreme communities is a symptom of the fact that:

> [P]eople who don't want to get on with their lives, and don't want to accept responsibility for the direction of their lives want to hang out with other people […] who are just like [them], because that's what's comforting. And so, that's what the world becomes for [them]; [they] don't even see people beyond those people who are just like [themselves].[132]

Palahniuk's communities are those wherein often-monstrous individuals abandon the real world to come together and revel in their communion of hopelessness, trauma, madness, mutilation. Whilst suicidal destruction is not necessarily sought by the retreating individuals, the communities in these novels (predicted on the confrontation and experience of death itself) do serve to present the possibility of self-destruction to 'relieve anxiety and to act as a catalyst for a more authentic life'.[133] Both novels posit pain and disobedience at the fulcrum of an ethical commitment to bring individuals together, yet what they do after individuals have come together reflects an inherent cultural cynicism and critique of the inability to truly transverse the conditions of neoliberal society.

In *Fight Club* and *Haunted* the radical, transgressive communities (be it the fight clubs or the writer's retreat), ultimately fall flat in their initial goals of liberatory praxis or a change in economic, cultural and political realities. Relief or promise of a radical alternative becomes a ruse utilized by megalomaniacs like Tyler Durden and Mr. Whittier, whose actions and efforts are concentrated on securing more power and control for themselves. As described in parts Two and Three, Tyler and Mr. Whitter recreate ideological microsystems that mirror and ultimately accelerate the repressive systems which they supposedly rebel against. Project Mayhem, for one, evolves into

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132 Palahniuk and Epstein, 'Fighting Fit' (2001).
133 Rocha, 'Disease and Community', p. 112.

a production-line business for manufacturing high-end cosmetics supported by politically-motivated and ubiquitous acts violence and terror. Meanwhile, the writer's retreat strives to recreate the conditions of a perverse/horrific and often warped hybrid of reality television that cultivates the consumer culture/cult of celebrity which the participants hope to ascend into and a theatre of cruelty.

In both novels it is evident that radical intention succumbs to complacency and the ingrained narcissistic desire for (or will to) power which are the hallmark of an irredeemable subjectivity borne under neoliberal and postmodern values. Aware of the problematic position to which the community in *Fight Club* has descended, Palahniuk revisits Project Mayhem and the transgressive community in *Fight Club 2* (2016)*.* Here, the progression of Project Mayhem to 'Rize or Die' is both disturbing and telling of the problems which so often inhibit contemporary radical ideas. The mantra, 'Rize or Die,' recalls and resembles a deliberate call to arms for the world's dispossessed and oppressed. The phrase captures the idea that people can and must unite and rise-up in revolution against current authorities and power-systems or be doomed to insignificance. This is, however, undermined as it is here the name of an underhand global corporation specialising in the distribution of for-hire security and military personnel who facilitate Tyler Durden's vision of a global, despotic regime built on the ruins of apocalypse. It is the novel's blatant critique of the ways in which the language of anarchism and rebellion has been co-opted and utilized within global corporate and political power-games that again eludes to the failure of radical politics and conventional resistance to ubiquitous neoliberal control. It also reiterates the need for groups and communities to reclaim radical discourse for themselves from both the proto-fascists and the powers of neoliberal hegemony. In this regard, Palahniuk presents a self-deprecating and to some extent depressive critique of society and the inability of the subject to transcend the corrupting human desire for power to the benefit of society or to negate the neoliberal system completely. Whilst sacrificial abuses and destructive communities in Palahniuk are initially sought, their evolution into organized groups represents something of a false panacea – the vision of transgressive and self-destructive bliss and social anarchy crumbles as more and more individuals at the heart of these groups descend into exploitative politics.

Palahniuk has repeated in numerous interviews that his novels are not truly nihilistic and are, to a certain extent, romances in that they are stories about people

facing adversity and finding one another. Perhaps this is why, throughout *Fight Club* and *Haunted,* the protagonists (and even the minor characters) so often fail to achieve any sustained or fundamental sense of freedom from the systems they despise. Characters settle, they anesthetize themselves from the harsh realities of life with company and with community, but while the sense of uncorrupted radical urgency is side-lined, it never truly dissipates. The cynical reaction to contemporary discontent is to put up a wall of banality and solitude, or even to masochistically dive headfirst into the situation to inoculate oneself from further onslaughts, as we have seen achieved in the fiction of Bret Easton Ellis in Chapter One and will again see in Chapter Three. Palahniuk's response to similar concerns, in *Fight Club* and *Haunted,* foregrounds the existential and material quandary and concern felt by his characters living within contemporary postmodern and neoliberal societies. It is to explore modalities of contravention and transgression in the wake of the overbearing hopelessness that permeates in the minds of those opposed to or threatened by neoliberal capitalism. These modalities are located throughout these novels in community and self-destruction, and particularly, in disobedience, subversion and negation as in *Haunted*, or in a direct and affective challenge of the system itself, as in *Fight Club.*

In *Fight Club* and *Haunted,* (self)destruction and the horrific manipulation of the bodily form are central to the self-affirming realisation of the Bataillean 'inner experience', or the sense of undoing oneself to become more authentic to one's innate desires and nature. Through disobedience an individual and/or group are promised the opportunity to reassert a modicum of control over lives that have seen the corrosion of individuality or freedom against a backdrop of rising neoliberal corporatism, consumerism and depressing, nihilistic culture. Although controlling demagogues like Durden and Mr. Whittier undermine the very communities they claim to serve for reasons hitherto outlined, unleashed self-destruction, (be it in the violence of the fight clubs, or the giving up of oneself to a communal identity) remains in these novels, a radical action within worlds wherein viable alternatives are otherwise lacking. These problematic actions and fantasies, which bring a subject closer to death, offer something of a cathartic experience that challenges and changes individuals' perspectives and relationships with the culture around them and brings them closer to others who share in the experience. As both novels suggest, communities (and the individuals therein) bonded by the shared experience of death

or death's immanence act from a position of absolute conviction in their nihilistic and destructive actions because they believe these activities to be capable of re-establishing a sense of meaning and purpose in spite of a dehumanising and dispiriting world. Furthermore, what *Fight Club* and *Haunted* demonstrate is a need to ensure that these experiences are neither dictated by a corrupting agent nor co-opted by the hegemonic logic of neoliberal capitalism.

Throughout both novels we have seen clearly how the community is formed in response to socio-cultural anxieties. These communities demonstrate a clear engagement with excess, (self)destruction and an embrace of transgression as a channel to establish new ethical bonds with others and to ascertain a sense of agency, control and freedom over lives that have little sense of purpose or direction. In the next chapter, I turn to the late fictions of J.G. Ballard, who like Palahniuk, explores the extent to which rebellious and outsider individuals often turn to the transgressive community to survive (or be distracted from) the negative or abusive reality they face. Where Palahniuk and Ballard diverge, however, is in the prominent advent of a spiteful psychopathology and a more intense exploration of nihilism as a radical and self-destructive discourse in Ballard. In the following chapter, I examine the extent to which two of Ballard's later novels exhibit the degeneration of the transgressive individual who (unlike the those in Palahniuk seeking to exceed or re-invent themselves) pursues only desire and distraction culminating in a choice between self-destruction or a masochistic and negative reinvestment of oneself into a culture or system.

This shift in critical teleology is characterised in the movement from optimistic or self-affirming *jouissance* (or the somewhat Sadean or masochistic fusion of pleasure and pain) that characterises the transgressive and self-destructive activities of Palahniuk's fiction, to a rigorous critique of the resigned and futile nature of transgressive thought and action as a catalyst for subjective or existential and socio-political empowerment or radicalism in Ballard's later fiction. Indeed, it is interesting that Ballard's late fictions evidence the extent to which a self-destructive sense of (masochistic) *jouissance* is experienced by characters only when they have become re-inserted into the systems and logic of postmodern capitalism, rather than through their attempted negation of it, as witnessed by Palahniuk's extreme communities. Thus, the turn from Palahniuk's self-confessed, though rarely realised, hope and optimism in the outsider community to Ballard's alienated, resigned and nihilistic

subjects throughout his later novels, reveals an important divergence of (and the increasingly fractured belief in) a viable, community-led or societal escape from the degenerating realism of neoliberal capitalism at the turn of the century.

CHAPTER THREE — COMPLICITY, RESISTANCE AND TERMINAL TRANSGRESSION IN J.G. BALLARD'S *SUPER-CANNES* (2000) AND *MILLENNIUM PEOPLE* (2003)

Introduction: Transgression and Psychopathology Against Degenerative Realism in J. G. Ballard

Set against a backdrop of extreme consumerism, capitalism and an impending sense of societal collapse, J. G. Ballard's later fictions present a unique and 'apocalyptic' response to capitalist realism and the denigration of the radical or transgressive alternative at the turn of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This phase of Ballard's career is, for a number of critics, distinctive from his early works that were particularly interested in surrealist dystopias predicated on natural disasters, and the investigative portrayal of transgression and technology in his 'middle period'.[1] Throughout his career Ballard was widely commended for his advocacy of a 'libertarian and anarchic stance' and for his harrowing and deeply unsettling depictions of the often inevitable subjective descent towards 'sustained act[s] of subversion' that are reflected in his novels' routine critical engagement with aesthetics and ethics of transgression and resistance in literature and culture.[2] As this chapter illustrates, however, Ballard's late fictions mark a particularly pessimistic phase in Ballard's career. Indeed, for critics like Dominika Oramus and Florian Cord, this phase of Ballard's career has been characterised by 'overwhelming inertia', 'exhaustion and psychopathology'.[3] My contention is that this is evident in the extent to which a self-

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[1] See Frida Beckman, 'Chronopolitics: Space, Time and Revolution in the Later Novels of J.G. Ballard', *Symploke* 21:1–2 (2013), 271–289 and Graham Matthews 'Consumerisms Endgame: Violence and Community in J.G. Ballard's Late Fiction', *Journal of Modern Literature* 36:2 (2013), 122–139.

[2] Andrzej Gasiorek, *J. G. Ballard* (Manchester: MUP, 2005), p. 1; Gregory Stephenson, *Out of the Night and into the Dream: A Thematic Study of the Fiction of J.G. Ballard,* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991), p. 1. See also Roger Luckhurst, *'The Angle Between Two Walls': The Fiction of J. G. Ballard* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998) and Michael Delville, *J. G. Ballard* (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers, 1998).

[3] Florian Cord, *J.G. Ballard's Politics: Late Capitalism, Power, and the Pataphysics of Resistance* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), p. 4; Dominika Oramus, *Grave New World: The Decline of the West in the Fiction of J.G. Ballard,* (Toronto: The Terminal Press, 2015), pp. 219–20.

destructive sense of (masochistic) *jouissance* is experienced by characters who become reinvested (both physically and mentally) into the systems and logic of postmodern capitalism following the failures of transgressive activities that sought to deliver an alternative.

The late fictions, *Cocaine Nights* (1996), *Super-Cannes* (2000)*, Millennium People* (2003) and *Kingdom Come* (2006), are indicative of a career spent probing the (dis)integration of subversion and resistance against a dystopian backdrop of political and cultural hegemony and its destructive effects on individuals and societies.[4] For Frida Beckman, Ballard's last four novels replace the surrealist reality of his early career 'with realistic, if not rather ironic', projections of the 'effects of the complete subsumption of human agency into the political and economic systems that organise the Western world today'.[5] This chapter develops such assertions by focusing on acts and the tensions that germinate between destructive acts of resistance and a cynical or passive complicity in the acceleration of damaging socio-cultural and political practices. In short, I examine the ways in which characters often find themselves unable to navigate freely between an anti-cultural and anti-subjective politics, discourse or action of resistance, or the adoption of the values of the very system or subjective impulses and machinations they sought to rebel from.

Ballard's late fictions are characterised by an 'incendiary' style which exhibit the fictions' transgressive and apocalyptic concerns, although I focus specifically here on *Super-Cannes* and *Millennium People*.[6] *Cocaine Nights* is explorative of the interaction between transgression and subjectivity within a leisure society and examines the 'psychopathic as a […] last refuge for a certain kind of human freedom'.[7] *Super-Cannes,* however, pursues similar concerns but within an explicitly capitalist-realist environment that critiques the extent to which leisure and affirmation are co-opted into the mechanics and ontology of capitalism. For Ballard, 'in a totally sane society the only freedom is madness', though the novels here examined seem unable to resist the subsumption of this final remaining freedom into the systems and logic of

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[4] J. G. Ballard, *Cocaine Nights* (London: Flamingo, 1996); J. G. Ballard, *Super-Cannes* (London: Flamingo, 2000); J. G. Ballard, *Millennium People* (London: Flamingo, 2003); J. G. Ballard, *Kingdom Come* (London: Flamingo, 2006).

[5] Beckman, 'Chronopolitics', p. 271.

[6] David James, 'Late Ballard', in *J. G. Ballard: Visions and Revisions,* ed. by Jeanette Baxter and Rowland Wymer (London: Palgrave, 2012) 160–176 (p. 165).

[7] Delville, *J. G. Ballard,* p. 85.

the hyper-rational political, cultural and economic machinery.[8] I therefore examine *Super-Cannes'* confrontation with the nightmare that befalls the subject when transgression and subjectivity are implemented and accelerated by a distinctly post/anti-human, hyper-capitalist logic. I concentrate on *Millennium People* over *Kingdom Come* because the former evidences a fatalistic and terminal, self-destructive appraisal of nihilistic discourse and *Kingdom Come* appears less concerned with the negation of values than it is in the extension of already-existent psychosocial standards. In a similar fashion to *Super-Cannes,* in *Kingdom Come* capitalism and consumerism are being reinstated as a community who have grown to 'disown the value of mutual responsibility and economic moderation' embrace an extreme brand of consumer-fascism.[9] While the critique of postmodern capitalism and consumerism are evident throughout the novel, what interests me is the response to existential and socio-political binds via a transgressive, counter-social, counter-political, counter-subjective ideal that appears in *Millennium People.*

Within both *Super-Cannes* and *Millennium People* a morally upstanding outsider infiltrates a transgressive community, is then increasingly seduced by and becomes complicit in their pathological conspiracies for and against uncannily reminiscent, accelerated neoliberal cultural and political systems. Throughout this chapter, my analyses of both texts point towards the fraught tension between complicity and resistance as a sign that transgressive activities (such as rebellion, violence and breaking the law) are inadequate as modes of resistance from an exploitative and all-consuming socio-political model, and from a defeatist subjective condition that is conditioned into acceptance and indeed desires for more of the same. However, as characters like David Greenwood, Paul Sinclair (*Super-Cannes*), Richard Gould and David Markham (*Millennium People*) discover, the initial inadequacy of the transgressive, the excessive or the undesirable energies they produce can be overcome when the subject is pushed to their most self-destructive and terminal limits. That is insofar as they become aware of the necessity to completely break from their inherent adherence to the values governing a post-enlightenment society to the point where they will break from life itself. As an aesthetic value, within these novels, self-

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[8] J. G. Ballard and Chris Hall, '"All We've got left is our own psychopathology": J. G. Ballard on *Millennium People*' *Spike Magazine* (2003) in J. G. Ballard, *Extreme Metaphors: Interviews with J.G. Ballard 1967–2008*, ed. by Simon Sellars and Dan O'Hara (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), 396–406 (p. 400).
[9] David James, 'Late Ballard', pp. 168–9.

destruction, nihilism and a masochistic, accelerationist approach to labour pose ideological and intellectual alternatives to the deadening and defeatist experience of life under the neoliberal capitalist regime. As a result, I examine the extent to which *Super-Cannes* and *Millennium People* chart the (d)evolution from transgression to revolution to nihilism amidst dystopian contemporary settings in which morality and meaning have been usurped the values of neoliberalism and the distinction between resistance and complicity becomes highly fraught.

This chapter builds on previous studies into the limitations of affective and subjective violence in Chapter One, and the role of cultural abjection, death and self-destruction in shaping a resistant alternative in Chapter Two. In so doing, the study of Ballard's later fictions extends the necessary examination as to the (problematic) extent to which freedom, resistance and transgression often manifest in the form of a spiteful psychopathology (be it of terminal accelerationism, which I will later detail, and/or nihilism), wherein the subject demonstrates a willingness to harm or dislocate themselves to disrupt a larger, and somewhat inaccessible enemy. Indeed, for Bülent Diken, spiteful acts of deviancy, which threaten everything and everyone with destruction, are a 'major affective dimension of sociality' which '[distils] a will to negation' that is counter to the cynical or passive-nihilist position.[10]

Ballard's late fictions explore the perverse thrill of deviant and self-destructive acceleration towards threat of danger. In so doing, his late fictions often channel the underlying message of the contentious critical and speculative response to malaise, apathy and socio-political apprehension that is related to an increased reliance on and subsumption into the technologies and systems of capitalist production and culture. Accelerationism refers to the political, philosophical and aesthetic application of this mantra and is defined as the belief that a way out or beyond the malaise of contemporary neoliberal capitalism is found by pushing it beyond its limits. Speeding up and speeding into technology, production and by adopting the logic of the neoliberal economy as a tactic to exacerbate the contradictions and excesses of the system to the supposedly inevitable point at which it breaks.[11] Ultimately, it is the call for a self-destructive re-investment or re-integration (of desires, agency and subjectivity) into

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[10] Bülent Diken, 'The (Impossible) Society of Spite: Revisiting Nihilism', *Theory, Culture & Society,* 26:4 (2009b), 97–116 (p. 98).
[11] Mackay and Avanessian, *#Accelerate*, p. 4; Noys, *Malign Velocities*, p. x.

modern technologies and capitalist logic. The aim being to reassert the importance and continuity of subjective agency within a system predicated on the dissolution (and destruction), extraction and abstraction of all tangible values and productive energies.

As Andrzej Gasiorek recalls, a central theme of Ballard's fiction is the position of violence as a fulfilling act wherein 'pure destructiveness is asserted as the only possible response to a purely absurd universe'.[12] Self-destruction, as persistently argued throughout this thesis, is the absolute epitome of this. It is an aesthetic and speculative signal of defiance that negates the rational in its compulsion to annihilate the suffering, defeatism and pain attributable to late capitalism and postmodernity that is, for many throughout these narratives, endemic within society and culture at the turn of the millennium. In Ballard, nihilistic and self-destructive violence (witnessed by the multiplicity of violent or traumatic ways in which the likes of Gould, Markham, Greenwood and both Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair end up harming or changing themselves) again problematizes the conception of disobedience or criminality as a valid form of resistance. Here the language of resistance and subversion becomes ever more complicit in the acceleration of Ballard's deleterious neoliberal utopias in which the 'inertia' and existential discontent felt by the subject in the 21st century is 'buried [and] interred behind a superficial frenzy of "newness", of perpetual movement' and transgression.[13] Following previous speculative excursions through contemporary transgressive American fictions, my turn to Ballard allows me to further develop the critique of cultural and political discontent within transgressive fiction at the turn of the millennium. The pervasiveness of issues raised in the previous chapters demonstrates that the question of self-destruction and resistance are both transnational, widely held and urgent. Furthermore, throughout Ballard's work I identify the allusions to an alternative model of society (both within and as other to the dominant mental and physical spaces of neoliberal capitalism) that goes beyond localised action or politics and affects the very core of human ethical and moral being.

The tension between resistance and complicity is a problematic concept throughout *Super-Cannes* and *Millennium People,* opening a space in which the expression of excessive behaviours seems a device that is contradictorily utilized by both mainstream communities (or those in power) in the solidification of their status,

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[12] Gasiorek, *Ballard,* p. 202.
[13] Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, p. 6.

and by rebellious or counter-cultural factions. In these two novels the provocative appeal of a self-destructive psychopathology and violence is evident in the fight against an increasingly streamlined, globalised and postmodern world, and in the subsequent – and self-destructive – integration of the human subject *into* neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, both novels engage with the transgression and acceleration of system and self in search of a modicum or agency or alternative. However, as these tensions are played out they demonstrate a lack of viable resistant alternative and the problematic consequences of the fusion of libidinous desires for sex, violence, power and agency within a hyper-capitalist and neoliberal environment.

Somewhat paradoxically, for many in these novels the answer to the threat of neoliberal capitalism *is* an accelerated engagement with technology, production and capitalism or the reinvestment of desire back into neoliberal power structures. As a predominantly aesthetic and imaginative possibility which takes a nihilistic and masochistic approach towards affecting the end of capitalism, 'accelerationism' determines that the speeding up these processes, technologies and the forces of neoliberal capitalism is necessary to reach the point at which the system collapses under its own excess.[14] Throughout this chapter, however, I read the acceleration of contemporary neoliberal capitalism and the ever-increasing transgressive behaviours within the texts in relation to (often incompatible) notions of resistance and a perverse and self-destructive form of desire that is sought by protagonists throughout *Super-Cannes* and *Millennium People*. Ultimately, this corresponds in the self-destructive (dis)integration of the transgressive subject(s), whose descent or journey towards psychopathology, antisocial and libidinous violence reveals the wider, underlying and terminal horror of their predicament as disaffected contemporary subject. A predicament in which unfulfilled individual desires lead to a sense of existential antipathy and further sublimation into the inescapable regimes of power in the respective novels.

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[14] In recent years, criticism describes the extent to which neoliberalism has co-opted and supplanted forms of resistance and transgression, corresponding with the devaluation of any systematic leftist alternative. Following the publication of Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek's '#Accelerate Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics', *Critical Legal Thinking* (2013), the synthesis of the economic and social theory of likes of Marx, the Italian Futurists, Deleuze, Lyotard and Fisher into a genealogy of Accelerationist philosophy in Mackay and Avanessian, *#Accelerate* (2014), and Noys' critique of Accelerationism in the excellent *Malign Velocities* (2014)*, the need to examine the possibilities and problems posed by 'accelerationism', in its left-wing and right-wing variants is urgent.

Although the distinction between resistance to the various incarnations of the 'neoliberal utopia' and complicity in the advancement of these spaces and systems proves highly problematic, Ballard offers a creative and even satirical take on radical action. The spaces in Ballard's fiction serve an antagonistic purpose wherein destructive energy is cultivated and adopted by the citizenry. As a result, agency becomes a problematic concept within the 'spatio-temporal coordinates of contemporary capitalist structures' as the target of nihilistic or rebellious action is particularly decentred as an ethereal and subjective, rather than simply material, entity.[15] The outcomes of these novels are often flawed as pro/antagonists rarely achieve any tangible indication that they have succeeded in their rebellious aims. Instead, whilst the violence often spirals uncontrollably, the hegemony of the system itself remains intact. Despite this, the conviction demonstrated throughout the narratives to shock protagonists out of existential and ethical malaise should not be understated. In the second part of this chapter I introduce accelerationism as a problematic method of 'challenging' neoliberal capitalism within *Super-Cannes* and demonstrate how accelerated visions of a neoliberal system descend into ever-increasingly dystopian and authoritarian nightmares.[16] The novel explores the possibility of the system's collapse and the re-injection of alterity that has been otherwise subdued, arguing that a much less clear-cut and often contradictory radical dynamic emerges.[17] Correspondingly, I later argue that *Millennium People* satirically plays on the appeal of terminal (or that which is totally and pessimistically committed to destructive fatalism) and nihilistic fantasies of meaningless violence that resonate in contemporary culture as a means of exceeding a degraded, licensed transgression afforded us by the capitalist system. Both *Super-Cannes* and *Millennium People* emphasise my thesis that some key contemporary texts are haunted by the appeal of self-destructive transgressive agency as a rejoinder to the 'unacknowledged banality' of the contemporary which sustains a 'dead' and 'simulated' socio-cultural power from which 'we have no escape'.[18] While their conclusions differ, these two novels are unanimous in their critique of a deleterious contemporary neoliberal world and in their

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[15] Beckman, 'Chronopolitics', p. 272.

[16] For an excellent, but not exhaustive overview of accelerationism, see: Andy Beckett, 'Accelerationism: How a fringe philosophy predicted the future we live in', *The Guardian Online* (11 May 2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/11/accelerationism-how-a-fringe-philosophy-predicted-the-future-we-live-in> [accessed 14 June 2017].

[17] Benjamin Noys, 'Crimes of the Near Future: Baudrillard / Ballard', *Ballardian*, (2007a) <http://www.ballardian.com/crimes-of-the-near-future-baudrillard-ballard> [accessed 25 November 2018].

[18] Noys, 'Crimes of the Near Future', paragraph 12.

foregrounding of (spiteful) self-destruction and the nihilistic annihilation of the neoliberal capitalist economic model as a catalyst for change. Consequently, this chapter concludes that scenes of transgression, psychopathology and fantasies of societal and subjective breakdown confirm Ballard's late fictions as highly charged and high-stakes critiques against the neoliberal social project at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

From his earliest literary works, Ballard's fiction has developed the notion of transgression as an existentially and politically affirming and annihilating action. In his examination of desire and transgression in his widely recognised novel *Crash,* Brian Baker argues that transgression operates by much the same logic as that of the influential and notorious French author Georges Bataille. In Ballard's work, like in Bataille, transgression pushes beyond and negates an enforced moral or juridical limit, and at the same time operates as the activity that gives initial authority to the limit.[19] *Crash,* Baker posits, 'conforms to the way in which Bataille understands transgression to operate', that is, as an 'oscillation of movement between the normative and its perversion'.[20] In so doing, he argues *Crash* is the archetypal transgressive text for the modern era and late-capitalist era, aggregating sexuality and technology so as to contravene (or re-adapt) normative representations of desire and explore new forms directly propounded 'by the conditions of contemporary, late capitalist life'.[21] In this scenario the attempted expression of desire through transgression becomes less a subjective issue than a socio-political one, that corresponds in the regression into the totalising logic of neoliberal capitalism and its enticing systems and simulation. A tension thus emerges from such readings regarding the extent to which the offending or transgressing subject is complicit in the formation of dystopian socio-political and cultural systems which manipulate, constrict and limit subjective freedoms. It is further significant that through his specifically dystopian and non-realist narratives, the critique of capitalist realism seems at its most intense as the author expressively experiments with the philosophies and activities that go beyond rationalist limits of convention and pose a serious, speculative threat to postmodern capitalism's cultural, psychic and material hegemony.

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[19] Brian Baker, 'The Resurrection of Desire: J.G. Ballard's *Crash* as a Transgressive Text', *Foundation* 80 (2000), 84–97.
[20] Baker, 'The Resurrection of Desire', pp. 93–4.
[21] Baker, 'The Resurrection of Desire', p. 84.

To reiterate, *Super-Cannes* and *Millennium People* are interesting departures from Ballard's earlier dystopian work. They foreground the negative and pessimistic implications of, and the vitally necessity of, transgression and self-destruction as a cure against a delusionary and degenerative realism, through the intricate examination of 'quotidian communities where the veneer of normalcy is supported by an undercurrent of criminality, violence and madness'.[22] As a result there is an emerging body of criticism that aims to speak to these novels focusing particularly on themes of transgression, resistance, psychopathology, accelerationist themes (although not necessarily overtly) and Ballard's interaction with the contemporary world, which I will introductorily map below. For Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson, Ballard's work demonstrates an exemplary imagination at work wherein simulated (or baseless and illusionary) systems of power and control within postmodern and neoliberal societies are foregrounded and challenged. His fiction, Jameson recalls, 'so rich and corrupt – testifies powerfully to the contradictions of a properly representational attempt to grasp the future directly'.[23] As Noys states in 'Crimes of the Near Future', for Baudrillard, Ballard's fiction stages 'the danger of simulation', or the dangers posed by ever-shifting and disembodied systems of power and control in postmodern, neoliberal societies, 'leading to the internal collapse of a social system and the way in which those who manage the system recognise this risk and "re-inject" alterity'.[24] This is recorded throughout Ballard's later fictions wherein an agent within a system of power prescribes transgression, alterity and destruction in an attempt to prolong or accelerate the simulation itself.

As will become clear throughout this chapter, Ballard's late fiction responds to the advancement of insidious, systematic power and the subjugation of the human subject by forcing the reader to consider the role, viability and necessity of an 'apocalyptic or catastrophic violence to exceed the regulated violence of contemporary culture'.[25] Ballard's fiction points to a future that is overcome with destruction and is reminiscent of the state of affairs described by Berardi as 'the slow cancellation of the future', introduced earlier.[26] For Berardi this statement recalls the perceived

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[22] Matthews, 'Consumerism's Endgame', p. 123.
[23] Fredric Jameson, 'Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?', *Science Fiction Studies*, 9:2 (1982) <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/27/jameson.html> [accessed 25 November 2018].
[24] Noys, 'Crimes of the Near Future', paragraph 7.
[25] Noys, 'Crimes of the Near Future', paragraph 7.
[26] Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *After the Future',* ed. by Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011), p. 13.

eradication of any possible alternative to an ever-accelerated and cyclical capitalism, countered only through a commitment to the possibility of psychological change resembling the negation of the capitalist realist (or for Berardi, the 'semiocapitalist') value system. In Ballard's late fictions, the very concept of a *beyond* or alternative is a radical gesture that often masochistically advocates abandonment of a simulatory and unsatisfactory present through a headlong dive into nihilistic ruin. This is evident in the later novels as the desire for an alternative that is vehemently opposed to an arrogant post-enlightenment utopianism, the never-ending exchange of capital, or of an oppressive neoliberal culture (in *Cocaine Nights* and *Super Cannes*) is sought through transgressive and terminal activities.

It is telling of the fraught and indeterminate status of nihilism as a viable radical philosophy or aesthetic, that in both *Super-Cannes* and *Millennium People,* Paul Sinclair and David Markham enthusiastically embrace nihilism as a dynamic existential enterprise, before ultimately undermining and disassociating themselves from it. However, to read the nihilism here as a parody and a value to be dismissed misses the point, which is the examination of a deeper cultural and societal malaise and its potential overcoming. The target of the texts' implied critiques are not nihilism per se, but a popularised version which fetishizes and aestheticizes violence for violence's sake.[27] Gasiorek acknowledges this when he argues that 'the superficial rebellion is the expression of a deeper malaise – the problem of nihilism which takes the form of millenarian despair'.[28] Violence and nihilism in the later fictions of Ballard is 'the source of a negative sublime' and it is this recognition of the dark and sublime qualities which must not be understated in any reading of both *Super-Cannes*'s and *Millennium People*'s transgressive and radical value.[29] Indeed, it suggests a radicalness that negates and exceeds moral categories and escapes the grasp and discourse of the contemporary neoliberal world in which the only self-overcoming applies to the institutions, corporations and sites of human exploitation, rather than the individuals and communities that serve them.[30]

A nihilistic and destructive critique of the postmodern contemporary is, however, a contentious issue throughout Ballard's later fictions, particularly as affective

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27 Gasiorek, *Ballard,* p. 190.
28 Gasiorek, *Ballard,* p. 195.
29 Gasiorek, *Ballard,* p. 198.
30 See Gasiorek, *Ballard,* p. 194.

resistance is staged through violent and amoral scenes that often solidify the power of the existing hegemonic systems. For James Fitchett, the most disturbing aspects of Ballard's late texts are not necessarily found in the scenes of violence or transgression, but in the suggestion that a moral defence of consumer/cultural Sadism can be extrapolated.[31] By this logic, 'resistance' becomes invested in the hyper-extension of consumerism, rather than in its negation. If this is the case, then the acceptance herein, that resistance or the downfall of consumer capitalism will not be caused by 'the desire to return to a romanticized "social" ideal, but instead [will be] a result of the waning of the sense of fulfilment that comes from consumption' suggests a much more disturbing and pessimistic scenario.[32] Namely, the acceleration and further embrace of ever-more destruction becomes necessary to speed up the process of decline, fall and (re)creation. The question then is to what extent this form of transgression is *resistant* to and critical of the status quo, as opposed to a self-defeating complicit act.

In partial response to question of transgression as resistant or complicit in Ballard, Jeanette Baxter claims that Ballard is a political writer who, through surrealist fantasies of violent boundary-crossing, explored politically and historically subversive alternatives to global capitalism.[33] For Gasiorek, Ballard's fictions consistently 'lay bare the psychopathology of everyday life in a post-humanist world' and seek to comprehend, in all its horror, a future that resembles 'an interminable present'.[34] This sentiment is to be echoed and interrogated in my intervention as I object to the notion that the symptoms of the postmodern capitalist system (trauma, inertia, meaninglessness) can be overcome by the acceleration of transgressive energies into the system itself. As previous chapters within this thesis have argued, social collapse *into* neoliberalism (which is considered as a highly horrific and absurd socio-political mode in its relentless abstraction and deterritorialization of a subject's being and labour), is the goal of nihilistic capitalism. In response, this chapter considers the extent to which a will-to-destruction in Ballard's work, (however fantastic or unrealistic,)

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[31] James Fitchett, 'Marketing Sadism: *Super-Cannes* and Consumer Culture', *Marketing Theory*, 2:3 (2002), 309–322 (p. 314).
[32] Fitchett, 'Marketing Sadism', pp. 318–9.
[33] Jeanette Baxter, *J. G. Ballard's Surrealist Imagination: Spectacular Authorship* (Ashgate: Farnham, 2009b), p. 10; p. 15.
[34] Gasiorek, *Ballard,* p. 20.

constitutes a divergence that 'manifests itself as an atavistic response to the fear of [this] absurdity'.[35]

The seductive appeal of violence also plays a crucial role throughout Ballard's fictional social critiques.[36] Graham Matthews analyses the idea that 'violence provides a cure for apathy and cultural malaise', contending that fictions like *Millennium People* caution against the use/abuse 'of violence within radical politics' which is a purely destructive force that is incapable of creating power.[37] Matthews comments that in each of Ballard's late novels, the narrators 'turn a blind eye to the potentially disastrous effects of violence to become part of the *revived* community. This suggests that violence is a necessary component of a disciplined and assertive community'.[38] Such readings confirm that transgression and resistance (on a communal scale) are complex issues, always in danger of succumbing to the hegemonic logic of the very system(s) they attempt to negate. What is apparent, as will be described, is the extent to which violence – in all its seductive allure – renders subjects complicit within systems predicated on existential and subjective sedation and communal control.

Citing Slavoj Žižek, Noys comments that 'a left politics that does not engage with the obscene underside is doomed to ineffectiveness'.[39] Ballard's late fiction however, is fascinated with the indecent, engrossed in the fantasy and exhibition of perversity and preoccupied with the excremental fallout of such activities. The question is to what extent transgression and violence contribute towards 'a preferable alternative to the stultifying effects of bourgeois conformity'.[40] Instead of a viable alternative, Ballard's late fictions exhibit forms of distraction and disruption that are principally engaged in contesting 'the problem of the inertia of enjoyment and the difficulty in any transformation or evacuation of that enjoyment'.[41] In the wake of an increasing and persistent critical dialogue and concern with cultural cynicism or postmodern pessimism, Ballard's response seems to advocate a return to nihilism that is fuelled by a desire to experience some element of transfigurative alternative. Indeed, it is 'the

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[35] Gasiorek, *Ballard,* p. 21.
[36] Matthews, 'Consumerism's Endgame', p. 124.
[37] Matthews, 'Consumerism's Endgame', p. 128; p. 132; p. 130; pp. 134–5.
[38] Matthews, 'Consumerism's Endgame', p. 138. Emphasis Added.
[39] Benjamin Noys '*La Libido Réactionnarie?*: The Recent Fiction of J. G. Ballard', *Journal of European Studies,* 37:4 (2007b), 391–406 (p. 395).
[40] Noys, '*La Libido Réactionnarie?*', p. 396.
[41] Noys, '*La Libido Réactionnarie?*', pp. 401–2; See also: Cord, *Ballard's Politics,* p. 6. In which he argues that Ballards's fiction forwards a 'realization of the fundamental *ineffectiveness of received forms of resistance* in the age of late capitalism'.

theme of escape that predominates', although it is not necessarily an escape that would please everyone.[42] Any sense of optimism about an escape engendered in the novel is short-lived. Instead, as Phillip Tew contends, these fictions' engagement with violent forms of resistance are 'intensely pessimistic' examinations of existential crisis.[43] This argument is a valid one, as the pessimism that underlies the failed resistance throughout these novels is demonstrative of a wider societal inability to meaningfully or lastingly resist or counter the underlying societal and subjective or existential malaise afflicting Ballard's protagonists after the initial shock and appeal of violent and aggression subsides.[44]

To better understand the resistant and complicit roles of transgression and extent of Ballard's critique of the contemporary, it is necessary to foreground its transformative intent – to recognise it as a means of rejecting a hegemonic system that cannot be restructured, broken up or adapted. The accelerationist argument can seem intensely self-defeating as it risks sacrificing a widespread desire for resistance for a cynical or defeatist integration of rebellious desires and labour into the system. However, it can be argued that this distasteful concept presents a radical form of nihilism that speculatively validates absolute destruction in the wake of a pressing lack of viable or satisfactory alternatives. Philosophically valid or not, as an aesthetic trope, accelerationism and terminal nihilism, exemplified in Ballard's dystopian, fictional responses to neoliberal capitalism (apparent in the repeated prescription of psychopathology and nihilism by characters such as Penrose and Gould) do posit the semblance of an alternative to cultural malaise and inertia that has befallen both subject and society. A paradoxical consequence of the advancement of neoliberal capitalism, accelerationism seeks to reimagine or re-energise the role of subjective agency and desire within a labour system that otherwise co-opts and strips the subject of all values and to reimagine a future that is an alternative to a dystopian present. As a philosophical or political model this remains contentious.[45] As an aesthetic trope

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[42] Gasiorek, *Ballard,* p. 205.

[43] Phillip Tew, 'Situating the Violence of J. G. Ballard's Postmillennial Fiction: The Possibilities of Sacrifice, the Certainties of Trauma', in *J. G. Ballard: Contemporary Critical Perspectives,* ed. by Jeanette Baxter (London: Continuum, 2008), 107–119 (pp. 107; 116).

[44] Tew, 'Situating Violence', p. 116.

[45] This is characterized by Mark Fisher as a somewhat Deleuzian 'politics that reject[s] all forms of the old world' in favour of the new, and 'a politics that demands "a social and psychic revolution of almost inconceivable magnitude".': Mark Fisher, '"A social and psychic revolution of almost inconceivable magnitude": Popular Culture's Interrupted Accelerationist Dreams', *e-flux Journal,* 46 (2013), 1–8 <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/46/60084/a-social-and-psychic-revolution-of-almost-inconceivable-magnitude-popular-culture-s-interrupted-accelerationist-dreams/> [accessed 25 November 2018], p. 6.

within Ballard's dystopian late fictions, however, the acceleration of transgression reveals the deleterious and self-destructive cost of the continued subjective investment into dystopian socio-political systems, and in our continued faith in persistently failing modes of resistance.

In what follows, I question the extent to which the terminal and nihilistic transgression in Ballard's fiction emerges as a viable mode resistance, or to which the accelerated extension of neoliberal capitalism marks the culmination of extreme cynicism within a contemporary period defined by a lack of divergent or radical alternative. My engagement with this theme throughout *Super-Cannes* and *Millennium People* thus follows two lines of enquiry. Firstly, I examine the validity of the (complicit) reinvestment of subjectivity into neoliberalism's systems as a means to extract some modicum of value – however masochistic or Sadean these may seem. I speculate that *Super-Cannes* presents a conciliation of Lyotard's claim in *Libidinal Economy* (1974) that proposes the working subject undoubtedly suffers through their relationship with and integration into the processes of capitalism, but that this suffering is tempered by a perverse, masochistic enjoyment or sense of *jouissance* towards their suffering from whence there is no alternative.[46] Herein, Penrose advocates and facilitates the expression of extreme instinctual, excessive, violent and sexual desires within a philosophical and territorial locale rigidly defined by the unethical, hypercapitalist and totalitarian logic of the business park. The third section of this chapter addresses the (lack of) confidence in revolution (be it hegemonic, class-based or wholly transgressive). I examine *Millennium People*'s justification of the acceleration and embrace of nihilism as an attempt to beat a fundamentally meaningless and nihilistic neoliberal society at its own game. It is a tract that I will read in the 'terminal' transgression of *Millennium People*.[47] As I have argued throughout this thesis, contemporary fictions explore the appeal of transgression and self-destruction as means of re-enthusing the human subject, particularly in the face of the dystopian scenes of the acceleration and spread of an imposing and totalizing neoliberal/neo-conservative cultural intelligence and rationality.

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[46] Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p. 116.
[47] Noys *Malign Velocities*, pp. 73–82.

'Nightmare at Eden': Accelerating Transgression and Complicity in *Super-Cannes*

Super-Cannes explores the dark fantasies of violence and perversion that underpin and sustain the dystopian, hyper-modern consumer and capitalist environment of the Eden-Olympia business park. The site of the 'late capitalist colonisation' of both space (the spread of the business park) and of the human mind (the park's ideology manipulates its inhabitants' morality and behaviour), Ballard's spectacularly dystopian satire of an affluent Mediterranean enclave paints a bleak picture of neoliberal capitalism, corporate elitism and the abstract, alienated, terminal zone that they perversely desire.[48] The novel follows the protagonist Paul Sinclair, in his investigations of a mass-murder committed at the park. Having followed his wife Jane, to Eden-Olympia after she replaces David Greenwood as the Park's resident doctor, Paul Sinclair soon becomes obsessed trying to uncover some conspiracy or motive behind the murderous rampage previously committed by Greenwood. In so doing, Sinclair encounters an obscene psychology of transgression and immorality thriving beneath the surface of the glistening, utopian capitalist model society. As the novel progresses Sinclair becomes sucked into the park's inner circle, increasingly impressed and intrigued by Wilder Penrose, the resident psychiatrist and arch-architect of Eden-Olympia's pathological and ethically obstinate culture of transgressive self-satisfaction. By the end of the novel it becomes apparent that Eden-Olympia is built on a much darker, violent and bleak vision of a (suspended) future in which desire and prescribed transgression accelerate the merger of the human subject and the systems and architectures of postmodern work and hyper-capitalist hegemony. In this way, Eden-Olympia reveals the nightmare of Franco Berardi's 'factory of unhappiness', wherein society and the individual are stripped of all human, ethical cognitive impulses and the sense of *jouissance* (or the excessive, motivating instinct for pleasure) is transposed into the process of labour itself, as demonstrated in the disparity between Jane's functional motivation at work, compared to her abject de-stimulation and physical degeneration outside it.[49]

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[48] Gasiorek, *Ballard,* p. 20.
[49] Berardi, *After the Future*, p. 55.

If, as Gasiorek argues, Ballard's earlier works 'depict social collapse as originating in the failure of the system', then in *Super-Cannes* the lives spent in a dystopian, anesthetized stupor of inertia and labour 'is the result of the system's *success*'.[50] Citing Fredric Jameson, Fisher argues that late capitalism, which Eden-Olympia is an extreme manifestation of, 'stands as an ominous portent of the (non)future of capitalist cultural production: both politically and aesthetically, it seems that we can now only expect more of the same, forever'.[51] Eden-Olympia is the culmination of hyper-capitalist rationality, a monument to the accumulation of profit that maximises social alienation, eradicates outside interference and promotes an abandonment of ethics and morality thought that ensures that workers 'no longer [need] to devote a moment's thought to each other', nor be distracted in their efforts and work.[52] Indeed, for critics like Matthews, the very hyper-organizational, deterministic spatio-logical construction of the park (which juxtaposes intense spaces of clean and clear light with the darkness of the shadows cast by its structures) symbolizes how 'enlightenment values of truth and reason' that supposedly drive neoliberal discourses of humanistic progressivism 'paradoxically generate the conditions necessary for criminality and violence' which further cultivate the conditions for anti-social, degenerative behaviours.[53]

Eden-Olympia is presented as the dystopian – rather than optimistic – site of acceleration *par excellence.* As such, I posit that the depiction of the excessive neoliberal enclave throughout the novel is tempered by a vehement critique of the dangers of annihilating accelerationism as a social and political model. This becomes further evident in what follows by the negativity that culminates in the subject's masochistic integration and degeneration through labour into the park's ethos. The park itself appears as a modern, abstract formulation of the machine of capital production, which, for Karl Marx in *Grundrisse,* consumes and transforms labour. As Marx describes it, in its obsession with producing an accumulative value to which primacy and power are attributed, 'labour passes through different metamorphoses, whose culmination is the *machine,* or rather, an *automatic system of machinery*', which

[50] Gasiorek, *Ballard,* pp. 20–1.
[51] Fisher, 'Popular Culture's Interrupted Accelerationist Dreams', p. 1.
[52] Ballard, *Super Cannes,* p. 38.
[53] Matthews, 'Consumerism's Endgame', p. 125: See also, Zhongyuan Zhang, André Spicer and Philip Hancock, 'Hyper-Organizational Space in the Work of J. G. Ballard', *Organization*, 15:6 (2008), 889–910.

in its neoliberal and capitalist realist formation is literally an automation, an abstraction of its own nefarious, excessive and incessant accumulation and consumption.[54]

Evident in the physical properties and metaphysical characterization of Eden-Olympia are the properties of Marx's machine/automation, which comprises of 'numerous mechanical and intellectual organs,' who oversee the degradation of the workers:

> In no way does the machine appear as the individual worker's means of labour. […] Rather, it is the machine which possesses skill and strength in place of the worker, is itself the virtuoso, with a soul of its own in the mechanical laws acting through it […]. The worker's activity, reduced to a mere abstraction of activity, is determined and regulated on all sides by the movement of the machinery.[55]

Akin to that described by Marx, Eden-Olympia is equally committed to delivering the abstraction of the worker and the transformation of 'living labour into a mere living accessory'.[56] Indeed, Penrose, the park's most vociferous cheerleader describes it as 'a huge experiment in how to hothouse the future', or how to manipulate technologies, the worker and working conditions so as to accelerate accumulation of profits.[57]

Against the backdrop of this stultifying corporate existence, the individual becomes little more than an 'automata' of a self-serving institutional logic and the possibility of a social or communal existence, which attracts many of the park's ageing and alienated residents, is revealed as a false, 'utopian dream'.[58] Paul Sinclair describes this as 'another Alice world'; a dystopian wonderland where 'corporate profits are higher than anywhere else in Europe and the people earning them are going mad together'.[59] This is a grotesque and unwelcome model for society in which the inhabitants are trapped in a state of exploitative inertia and libidinous dependence on the park. It is, as Sinclair notes, 'an executive-class prison', a model for the right-wing, authoritarian systems of the future that, drawing on Eden-Olympia's manipulation of neoliberal values and commitment to abstraction and technology, 'would be subservient and integrating'.[60]

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[54] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy,* trans. by Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993 [1939]), p. 692.
[55] Marx, *Grundrisse,* pp. 692–3.
[56] Marx, *Grundrisse,* p. 693.
[57] Ballard, *Super Cannes*, p. 15.
[58] Gasiorek, *Ballard,* pp. 174–5.
[59] Ballard, *Super Cannes,* p. 250.
[60] Ballard, *Super Cannes,* p. 133.

Despite the concerns about the park's destructive influence and effect on those caught within its ideology, it is perhaps not altogether strange that Eden-Olympia's residents vehemently embrace the morally vacuous, 'decentred, cybernetic subjectivity' and the total immersion into their work that the ontology of Eden-Olympia demands, as labour becomes 'the perfect conduit for their most wayward fantasies'.[61] Georges Bataille evocatively described the human proclivity to stare into the face of the void and become intoxicated by its consciousness. He argued that it 'throws us into exaltation. [Yet] this does not mean that we feel an emptiness in ourselves, far from it; but we pass beyond that into an awareness of the act of transgression'.[62] Eden-Olympia is similar to this void, a morally empty space within which the subject can imagine his or her fall as a possibility that excites deep-rooted transgressive desires.[63] In a meaningless and morally vacuous world, work or labour becomes the anchor of purpose and pleasure. While the notion of human worth being correlative to its productive output is not a new idea, Eden-Olympia takes this further as a breeding-ground for a new race of decentered, accelerationist workers. Referring to the staff at the park, Penrose boasts: 'They're our biggest investment. It's not so much their craft skills as their attitude to an entirely new workplace culture'.[64] That Eden-Olympia is set up to take advantage of this presents the reader with an almost nightmarish scenario in which an uncannily reminiscent, neo-conservative, postmodern socio-political narrative/agenda actively oversees the exploitation and absolute destruction of humanity, ethical values and agency.

For Karl Marx and latterly Jacques Camatte, the acceleration of productive forces transforms the human being into a passive machine part, or a 'conscious linkage' between the fluxes of capital and means of production.[65] 'On this we agree', states Camatte, 'the human being is dead'.[66] This is echoed throughout *Super-Cannes* as 'work dominates life in Eden-Olympia, and drives out everything else' from the desire for leisurely or libidinous activity to ethical values, individual identity and the possibility of radicalism, dissent/critique or agency.[67] Resultantly those subjects

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[61] Gasiorek, *Ballard,* pp. 23–4.
[62] Bataille, *Eroticism*, p. 69.
[63] Bataille, *Eroticism*, p. 97.
[64] Ballard, *Super Cannes,* p. 16.
[65] Marx, *Grundrisse,* p. 692.
[66] Jacques Camatte, 'Decline of Humanity?', edited extract from *The Wandering of Humanity,* trans. by F. Perlman (Detroit: Black and Red, 1975), in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader,* ed. by Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), 131–146 (p. 145).
[67] Ballard, *Super Cannes,* p. 254.

abandon humanity, they avoid others and the trappings of the leisure society, and spare no energy on emotion, civic concerns or morality, nor do they expend energy to the consideration of 'other people's strengths and weaknesses, [or] our obligations to them or feelings of dependence'.[68] They channel the business ontology that the park effuses, paradoxically, to heighten their sense of worth and to find meaning in an otherwise stultifying, postmodern void.

In this neoliberal utopia of the information age, any stance of resistance is futile. The worker works harder than ever for as long as they can, else they be judged redundant and cast aside. Rather than finding fulfilment in a subversive or anarchic break from the top-down system of control, 'they find their only fulfilment through work [and] focus their energies on the task in front of them'.[69] That subjects wilfully submit to their role as appendages of capitalism demonstrates the extent to which the system has successfully inserted itself as the dominant hegemonic logic, undermining any cause or demand for a sense of resistance, liberty or alternative form of subjective being and societal order. For Penrose, a strong autonomous socio-political model sustained by the values and excesses of neoliberal capitalism – of the Eden-Olympia model – (rather than the total negation of socio-political order) clears the path for the human being to revel in their free and individual nature. In response to Paul Sinclair's cynicism, Penrose tries to convince him of the productive and the liberatory value of this: '[when] a giant multinational like Fuji or General Motors sets its own morality. The company defines the rules that govern […] that leaves us *free* to get on with the rest of our lives. We've achieved *real freedom,* the freedom from morality'.[70] This is not, however, a kind of freedom that Sinclair recognises, and for the sceptical reader Penrose's conviction reveals a widespread failure to effectively resist the system, emphasised further in the tragic denigration of the moral and life-affirming capacities of those who submit to the park.

Despite his appreciation for the way in which the system so rigorously achieves its authoritarian aims of control by mobilizing its highly-skilled corporate workforce into a cyclical and irresistible future of accelerated production, Penrose laments the psychic, social and physical malaise that Eden-Olympia's residents suffer.[71] He

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[68] Ballard, *Super Cannes,* pp. 254; 255.
[69] Ballard, *Super Cannes,* p. 254.
[70] Ballard, *Super Cannes,* p. 95. My emphasis.
[71] See Ballard, *Super Cannes,* pp. 128; 225.

particularly resents the residents' alienation from one another and breakdown of social order that follows the parks 'breeding' of 'internal exiles without human ties but with enormous power'.[72] In their lack of social concern and emotional energy, the park's residents reveal themselves as what Fisher describes as 'the meat puppet of Capital', who 'can and will be ultimately sloughed off'.[73] We see this progressively happen to Jane over the course of the novel as she transforms from sprightly, spontaneous and rebellious young woman, to passive, submissive and compliant component of the park's infrastructure, totally consumed in her work. Work which ironically attempts to further integrate the worker biologically (through diagnostic testing and genetic modelling) into the machinery of Eden-Olympia. Her deterioration coincides with her increased productivity and personal/professional reliance on and integration into the park.[74]

While productivity levels are up and the Park's residents' complicity in its growth becomes ever more pronounced, the corresponding physical and psychic deterioration of the integrated subjects becomes an increasing problem. For Penrose, this is problematic because it affects the social order that he wishes to maintain. For the Park's corporate backers and investors, what is problematic is the malaise's impact on company profits and prestige, especially when it spills over into destructive action against the park itself – as tested in the aftermath of the Greenwood massacre. In response to the petrifying existential inertia that follows the integration of the worker into the system, Penrose attempts to reinvigorate the park's flagging residents to stave off and resist the disintegrating effects of the park's relentless demands. To do so, he prescribes a problematic remedy of extreme and libidinous transgression. Violence, aggression and self-destruction are thus administered as a 'therapeutic regime'.[75] The problem is that, somewhat counter-intuitively, transgressions sold as a viable means of reinjecting agency and meaning in response to an agonising existential predicament in fact disguise a meticulous and underhand, state-benefitting, subjective deconstruction and remodelling of the park's inhabitants that oversees their fatalistic integration into the accelerating processes and mechanics of capitalism itself.

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[72] Ballard, *Super Cannes,* p. 256.
[73] Mark Fisher, 'Terminator vs. Avatar: Notes on Accelerationism', *Mark Fisher ReBlog* (2010) <http://markfisherreblog.tumblr.com/post/32522465887/terminator-vs-avatar-notes-on-accelerationism> [accessed 14 June 2017].
[74] Ballard, *Super Cannes,* p. 277.
[75] Ballard, *Super Cannes,* p. 306.

Super-Cannes' novel treatment of transgression and violence is perhaps the most contentious and disturbing aspect of the text for readers, as members of the park's inner circle routinely commit terrible and violent crimes that range from theft, assault, drug dealing, overseeing a child sex-ring, rape and murder. That these acts are committed under instruction from Penrose as part of an administered programme of psychopathy is even more contentious. On the surface, violence is justified as a coping mechanism, posing as resistant mode of alterity to the park's (and by extension, neoliberal capitalism's) deterritorialization and colonization of the mind and destruction of subjectivity:

> At Eden-Olympia, madness is the cure, not the cause of the malaise. Our problem is not that too many people are insane, but too few. // The cure sounds drastic, but the malaise is far more crippling. An inability to rest the mind, to find time for reflection and recreation. Small doses of insanity are the only solution. Their own psychopathy is all that can rescue these people.[76]

However, as Gasiorek confirms, Penrose in fact fosters individuals' most atavistic and transgressive desires with the aim of making them more healthy and thus more economically productive.[77] The result of such acts is an intense complicity marked by an increased productivity beneficial to the system and the self-destructive integration of libidinous desires (and drives) for grotesque, corporeal and psychic pleasure into the system, corresponding in the conditioning of the group into the ontological/moral logic of the park. In this regard, the accelerationist transgressions of the Eden-Olympia's residents resemble the call for a 'libidinal economics' that incentivises subjective integration into the system as the subject 'gleefully' subject explores the 'escap[e] *from* human civilization'.[78] In so doing, the role of transgression as a radical gesture is damaged in the novel and threat to the park's hegemony severely limited through its actualisation.

In *Super-Cannes,* violence and psychology are symptomatic of, and built-into the (im)moral fabric of capitalist and neoliberal society. Whilst Penrose convinces his followers that an accelerated psychopathy is a cure from the park, he obfuscates the extent to which psychopathy, crime and transgression are fundamental components of the park and the business ontology it imbues. This is something which Halder,

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[76] Ballard, *Super Cannes,* p. 251.
[77] Gasiorek, *Ballard,* p. 191.
[78] Mackay and Avanessian, *#Accelerate,* p. 20.

engaged in his own rebellious subterfuge against the park, comments on when we quips, '[n]o crime?', 'some people would say that crime is what Eden-Olympia is about'.[79] Pascal Zander, the park's chief of security, is similarly reticent about the park's inbuilt penchant towards, and unconscious facilitation of (even demand for), transgression. Here, Zander states, 'people can commit crimes and be unaware of it […]. Here [it is] a game without rules'.[80]

As a work of transgressive fiction, *Super-Cannes* stages an accelerated – and self-destructive – version of corporeal and psychological transgression, through which we would perhaps expect the exploration or delivery of a viable model or form of resistance. For violence and psychopathology to present a way *beyond* an existent systemic rationality or structure that, for many of the park's inhabitants, contributes to their physical and mental malaise and deterioration, is 'banal' and sustains simulatory and 'dead[ening] forms of contemporary culture'.[81] *Super-Cannes,* however, disappoints on these expectations. On the basis of this, Penrose's public position is clear; a terrible situation justifies a terrible response, or as Kay Churchill in *Millennium People* puts it: 'If the means are desperate enough, they justify the ends'.[82] Penrose advocates psychopathy and the acceleration of transgressive and abject fantasies to Eden-Olympia's residents because he 'is convinced that only meaningless violence and gratuitous madness can rescue this super-efficient elite from the malaise of efficiency and help them discover who they are'.[83]

Penrose's prescription of psychopathology, on the surface, encourages those partaking to discover 'the truth about themselves'.[84] This is supposedly transgression as a creative, rather than destructive, recreational force that reinserts a sense of vitality and sense of self and community into otherwise anesthetized, alienated human automata. He is adamant that his prescription is 'the blueprint for an infinitely more enlightened community' and the establishment of a strong, exclusive society within the wealthy communities of Eden-Olympia.[85] In so doing, he envisions the kind of society of excess, the likes of which Sade so disturbingly and satirically wrote about in novels

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[79] Ballard, *Super Cannes,* p. 60.
[80] Ballard, *Super Cannes,* p. 85.
[81] Noys, 'Crimes of the Near Future', paragraph 17.
[82] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 160.
[83] Beckman, 'Chronopolitics', p. 282.
[84] Gasiorek, *Ballard,* p. 23.
[85] Ballard, *Super Cannes,* pp. 264–5.

like *120 Days* or *Philosophy in the Bedroom*: societies in which desire flourishes and every violent or libidinous possibility is explored.[86] In *Super-Cannes,* those looking for some form of release from their depressive malaise consider violence to be both spectacular and exciting. Within a society where money is no object and leisure no respite, the subject hungers for excess, obscenity and excitement, hungrily consuming the most extreme and appalling activities made available to them in the process. However, as Sinclair retorts: 'You begin by dreaming of the *Übermensch* and end up smearing your shit on the bedroom wall', suggesting that these excessive and excremental forms of release and self-aggrandisement are in fact infantile and futile gestures, devoid of any revolutionary credential.[87]

Presented then, in *Super-Cannes*, is a variant transgression which – rather than resembling a spontaneous, creative eruption that challenges hierarchies, or subverts existing systems of power – in fact re-inscribes and reinforces them in its failure to articulate or conceive of the possibility of other values or activities that move beyond the (pre-inscribed) dialectic of the acceptable and the unacceptable. Here, violence and perversion are the obscene economy off of which the business park survives as the excess product of the community's indecency, discontent and violence is repurposed as the industrious (if somewhat unspoken) fuel driving the perpetual advancement of the intellectual, hegemonic logic and material functionality of Eden-Olympia. The transgressive actions of the 'Bowling Clubs', for example, escalate and are facilitated and legitimised by the Park's own juridical and economic systems. A measure of this is the extent to which Eden-Olympia's security personnel often 'clean up' or cover up the illegal activities of the park's residents. Another is the PR machine built up around the park ensures that no negative press emerges in the fallout from these activities, which include the widespread facilitation of child prostitution, rape and sexual assault. What is more, these activities, which are legitimised and facilitated within the framework of the business park, serve a precise, ultra-conservative and exclusionary social function. Throughout the novel, revealed in the racist and classist overtones of their ideology, is the legitimised exclusion, exploitation and abuse of the uninvited/other (specifically the neighbouring, poorer, Arab and black populations) that

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[86] Rachid M'Rabty, '*Philosophy in the Bedroom*: Subversion and the Marquis de Sade's Impossible School of Libertinage', *The Dark Arts Journal,* 3:1 (2017) <https://thedarkartsjournal.wordpress.com/volume-3-1-gothic-today/subversion-de-sade/> [accessed 14 June 2017].
[87] Ballard, *Super Cannes,* p. 297.

reveals a despicable desire, on the part of the park's leadership, for an exclusively elitist, neoliberal-fascist society or wealthy and productive, racially and culturally homogeneous automata.

Despite an absurd moral and philosophical justification that considers their victims in distinctly Sadean terms – as beings to be used and abused at an individual's will – and considers violence a pre-requisite to a self-edifying and enlightened sense of existential re-activation or affirmation, the hyper-transgressive activities and expressions of libidinous desire by the park's residents are manipulated into labour and an exertion of the park's unconscious will. Thus, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that transgression and madness are a necessary component of the effective, reified worker within the neoliberal capitalist system. Demonstrative of this are the '*rattisages*' and militaristic activities carried out in the surrounding towns of La-Bocca and Nice. These are prescribed, regimented and organised tasks, rather than a spontaneous creative eruption or violence. Again, these acts serve to create a social hierarchy and assert the power of the park on a fearful and subservient population. Equally, they contribute to the seduction and integration of individuals into Eden-Olympia and to an arousal of feeling and allegiance to the park. This is particularly resonant in the way in which Paul Sinclair is gradually seduced by Penrose's vision:

> The display of brutality had unsettled me. […] a dormant part of my mind had been aroused – not by the cruelty, which I detested, but by the discovery that Eden-Olympia offered more to its residents than what met the visitor's gaze. […] a dream of violence.[88]

It is clear that as the novel progresses Sinclair becomes further involved in transgressive activities which serve the unconscious and sacrificial needs of the park's residents. His actions are demonstrative of the way in which his integration into and complicity with unconscious machinery of the park is successful. It is also bleak evidence of how the allure of deviancy corrupts and compels even the most moral subject to accept the advancement of the capitalist realist socio-cultural discourse into all psychosocial and spatial areas. His complicity with Penrose's plans also reveals the self-destructive consequences of the pursuit of transgressive activities that have been co-opted by postmodern capitalist society, as the desire for self-affirmation (within a framework that is resistant to any expression of agency that challenges the

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[88] Ballard, *Super Cannes,* p. 75.

primacy of its own intent) leads him towards a fatalistic, accelerationist dive into the flesh-churning, abstract machinery of the system itself.

In spite of accelerationism's trenchant appeal to transgressive desires, for Noys, what is actually 'extinguished is the libidinal as accelerationism reproduces the deadening experience of lab[our] as the site of masochistic enjoyment'.[89] This is precisely what we see happen in *Super-Cannes* as the likes of Jane and Paul Sinclair seek existential and libidinous fulfilment, not with one another, but through the machinery and enterprises of the system, reflecting their adherence to and adoption of the 'libidinal fantasy of accelerationism'.[90] Accelerationism attempts to overcome the horror of work through an appeal to 'the *jouissance* of machinic immersion' as the beginning of an alternative to entrenched societal and existential pessimism.[91] Throughout the text, Paul is accused of being 'deeply impressed by Eden-Olympia' after he evidences a profound belief in Penrose's 'lunatic ideology' as it appeals precisely to his libidinal fantasies.[92] It is a belief which throughout the course of the novel matures into a deeply accelerationist immersion in Penrose's schemes and the machinic activities of the business park, as he labours for feelings of (sexual) power, belonging and purpose that he otherwise lacks, particularly since his flying accident and literal and metaphorical 'grounding'.

Throughout the novel transgression, in many ways, becomes an extension of labour that secures the hegemony of the dystopian accelerationist society of Eden-Olympia and further integrates human 'desiring machines' within the system. The transgression of the rule of law in *Super-Cannes* is not resistant as it plays on the trenchant and unconscious appeal of psychosocial violence within this one peculiar society. Ultimately, the legitimization and facilitation of transgression ensures that the nefarious, metaphysical and machinic systems which drive the park's ideology remain ever-shifting, fluid and always functional to appeal to the libidinous desires of a labour force who seek an alternative to an otherwise, depthless, affectless and monotonous existence. In this novel, Ballard has created a nightmarish and dystopian parable of the ways in which postmodern and neoliberal culture manufactures the possibility of its own ruination in order to control discord and generate the necessary excremental

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[89] Noys, *Malign Velocities,* pp. 47–8.
[90] Noys, *Malign Velocities*, pp. 47–8.
[91] Noys *Malign Velocities*, p. 93.
[92] Ballard, *Super Cannes,* p. 351.

energies that keep its own wheels churning. Again, in this scenario, the dissenting or discordant subject is driven to literal self-destruction either through their total immersion into the mechanics of the system or through a fatalistic or psychological collapse into cynicism.

Evident throughout *Super-Cannes* is the depiction of a post-industrial, cybernetic society of psychopathology and violence. Through dystopia, Ballard forces his readership to reflect on the viability or even possibility for an imagined alternative society where the instruments of negation – transgression and self-destruction – have been compromised. By the end of the novel two possible modes of rebellion are proposed, the first is Halder's anarchistic and covert effort to re-introduce the contingent world into Eden-Olympia to destabilise its surreal and spectacular pretence, to undermine the integrity of the park's values and to expose its structural and ontological hypocrisy. Surprisingly, the second act of anarchistic revolt is Paul Sinclair's intention to carry out a spectacular and violent act to undermine and expose Eden-Olympia to the point of collapse. By the end of the novel Sinclair finds the strength within himself to rebel against Eden-Olympia and Penrose's unchecked accelerationism, which has laid waste to his own moral and ethical coordinates. Sinclair determines to administer fatal retribution against those responsible for the park's crimes against humanity. Like David Greenwood before him, Sinclair's uprising against the park – which the novel stops short of delivering – is desperate and seemingly doomed to failure and it is likely that Sinclair's violent rebellion will mirror the failed attempt of his predecessor.[93] Indeed, the park has already demonstrated an ability to absorb and manipulate extreme and pseudo-anarchic transgressions for its own purposes, just as the violent and sexual perversions (sought by the park's rampaging hierarchy) are used to reinject a sense of personal drive and libidinous energy that allows subjects to continue to function within the system.

In *Super-Cannes*' typically dystopian representation of the destabilising psychosocial effects of technological and cultural modernity, the extent to which capitalism takes control of these energies to maintain and accelerate the forces of production is unnervingly clear. The self-destructive, head-first rush into transgression in the novel undoubtedly contribute to a subject's libidinous investment into the Eden-

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[93] Gasiorek, *Ballard,* p. 174.

Olympia framework. The work-like pursuit of violence by the park's elite both incites and re-enthuses them, recalling Lyotard's masochistic workers in *Libidinal Economy*, who find a perverse pleasure and value in their suffering and in the suffering of others through work. In this sense transgression seems a cyclical act in that, rather than ushering in a new kind of future, which as Berardi argues is impossible in a postmodern capitalist society, it would only repeat the failures of past and further solidify the psychosocial adherence to the hegemony of the park. Transgression, here, is thus a somewhat depressive and fatalistic act that parallels a 'loss of political composition and antagonism' and the distinct lack of a viable, conceptual re-imagining of a progressivist socio-political and cultural framework beyond capitalism.[94] In the wake of the park's obstinate and totalizing reach we are left with a sense that Paul Sinclair's proposed act of anarchic resistance will actually come to serve the park, rather than become the negation or undoing of the park's totality. No doubt, Sinclair is to be cast as the sacrificial victim, whose self-destruction actually bonds a community together and feeds its libidinous hunger for violent spectacle just as throughout the novel all excremental or negative energies/actions are reinvested into something complicit and productive (or at least profitable) to the park's obscene economy. As a result, *Super-Cannes* critically examines the pessimistic concession that transgression is not any longer (if it ever was) resistant to the threatening reality of neoliberal capitalism. Moreover, the transgressing subject here is complicit in ensuring that the park's accelerationist trajectory remains on a devastating and dystopian course.

Such is the extent to which this recoding of transgression into, rather than against, the system is effective in *Super-Cannes* (and indeed Ballard's other later novels) that Benjamin Noys argues they foreground the ambiguity and exhaustion of the transgressive gesture as a revolutionary act capable of challenging perceived failures in society, community and expression.[95] That said, and while critiquing the reactionary nature of the violence in Ballard's late fiction, Noys does see a flickering of hope here in the form of a highly charged, critical warning against the political and cultural trajectory in the early twenty-first century, and in the depiction of a 'politics of disruption'.[96] Despite a doubtful and resigned tone throughout, the novel does

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[94] Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn, 'Preface: The Transversal Communism of Franco Berardi', in Franco 'Bifo' Berardi*, After the Future,* ed. by Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011), 3–7 (p. 7).

[95] Noys '*La Libido Réactionnarie?*', pp. 403–4.

[96] Noys '*La Libido Réactionnarie?*', pp. 403–4.

demonstrate the urgent need to grasp at some form of resistance, in spite of the consequences to the subjects themselves. In David Greenwood's 'heroic' massacre, perhaps even in Paul Sinclair, and as I move on to examine, in *Millennium People's* Richard Gould, we are presented with 'transgressing subjects' who – despite the seeming futility of their insurgency within the hard-to-escape ontological and material spaces of postmodern capital – are 'driven by a desire to free one's life from the safety of subjection'.[97] For Christina Foust, 'transgressing subjects' are 'embodied performers whose creative actions defy or elude (at least temporarily) the terms of prescriptive subjectivity'.[98] These subjects aspire to subjectivity through nihilism and 'refuse to use their words or bodies as representative of larger agents. As such, they appear dangerous to those whose identities and power are vested in common values and norms'.[99] In the final section of this chapter, I turn to the prescription of disruption, nihilism and what Noys labels 'terminal acceleration', as a means of negating or resisting the existential malaise that affects the neoliberal subject.

Failed Resistance, 'Terminal' Transgression and *Millennium People*

In J.G. Ballard's transgressive and morally complex novel, *Millennium People* (2003), psychologist David Markham is jolted from the inertia of his comfortable, middle class life after the traumatic spectacle of seeing his ex-wife killed in a terrorist explosion at Heathrow Airport on television. In an attempt to find the culprits, Markham infiltrates the abrasive and growing protest circuit in London, from which he hopes to understand the motivation behind the attack. Markham soon becomes swept up in the Chelsea Marina residents' protest against the auspices of middle-class civility. As he becomes more involved in the protest movement, initially in an investigatory capacity and latterly as a key figure in the revolution itself, he is seduced by an ambitious antagonistic firebrand Kay Churchill, and latterly by the charismatic outsider Richard Gould and his bleak and fundamentalist attitude towards violence and resistance. As the novel progresses, the Chelsea Marina campaign of civic disruption collapses but a spate of

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[97] Foust, *Transgression as a Mode of Resistance*, p. 19.
[98] Foust, *Transgression,* p. 17.
[99] Foust, *Transgression,* p. 19.

seemingly untargeted and random attacks points towards the emergence of an urgent radical stand taken by fringe elements with far reaching ethical and social consequences, of which I will examine in greater detail in the following pages.

For Simon Critchley, 'deploying a politics of subversion, contemporary anarchist practice [in the real world] exercises a satirical pressure on the state in order to show that other forms of life are possible'.[100] *Millennium People,* takes a sardonic and even ambiguous approach to protest and nihilism that exercises a cynical critique of contemporary culture and politics, but is however weary of committing to a valid or even possible alternative through anarchy. Throughout the text, a litany of horrors and laughable actions are evident as terrorism and spectacles of destruction coincide with a middle-class caricature of the Bolshevik revolution. These protestors arm themselves with *Perrier*-bottle Molotovs to storm the BBC and protest an economic structure that demands they pay their mortgages by 'occupying' their suburban homes. In light of such scenes, Jeanette Baxter re-politicizes the surrealist humour of Ballard's oeuvre, contending that while 'Ballard experiments with various types of humour – ironic, deadpan, black, wry', he does so to 'expose the vacuous nature of the Chelsea Marina Revolt'.[101]

Whilst the satirical nature of the revolution here serves to expose and dismantle 'a prevailing social consciousness', I do not necessarily ascribe to Baxter's rendering of the failed revolt as a vacuous joke.[102] Instead, as Florian Cord suggest, 'the juxtaposition [in *Millennium People*] between the dissenters' radical rhetoric and their affluent and protected existence […] are occasions for laughter' but this should not overlook the 'genuine political impetus' of the text.[103] Likewise, the humour of the text and its satirical overtones should not be dismissed as superficial or as undermining the revolutionary impetus and 'seriousness' of the novel. That said, I too question extent of the protesters' emancipatory practices as the all-too-easy failure of the revolt, which demonstrates the limited capability of a toiling Left alternative and revolution.[104] In *Millennium People*, transgression and protest are ripe for valid social critique and in the following I take the text as a speculative mediation on resistance in the neoliberal

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[100] Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, p. 124.

[101] Baxter, *J. G. Ballard's Surrealist Imagination*, p. 209: See also pp. 210–1 for some of the more humorous scenes and ironic intricacies of the text.

[102] Baxter, *J. G. Ballard's Surrealist Imagination*, p. 179.

[103] Cord, *J. G. Ballard's Politics,* pp. 193, 202.

[104] Cord, *J. G. Ballard's Politics,* p. 193.

era. In so doing, I read the more overtly ironic and satirical scenes in the novel more seriously than others. Yet by focusing on the implications of such scenes in the text, I show the extent of Ballard's cynicism and pessimism (which is distinctly not the same as pseudo-politics or a parody of political action, but a condition of the contemporary age), and examine the implications of a cultural incapability to act against a very serious opposition. J. G. Ballard, himself seems to confirm this line of thought when he states that:

> Readers say that *Millennium People* made them laugh aloud, which is wonderful […]. But perhaps that in itself is a sign of how brain-washed the middle-classes are. The very idea that we could rebel seems preposterous.[105]

The line also makes apparent the seriousness of Ballard's satirical and dystopian fiction as a political statement. The gallows humour in evidence throughout such works is less a playful or cynical rejoinder to the impassivity of rebellion, than it is a derisive provocation for the political left to rethink their strategies and commitment. Against 'our totally pacified world', for Ballard 'the only acts that will have any significance at all will be acts of meaningless violence'.[106] Thus, unless the modalities and manifestation of revolutionary and radical determination can be rethought, for Ballard, the fear is that 'boredom and inertia may lead people to follow a deranged leader […] simply to relieve the boredom' as is the case within his later dystopian literary iterations.[107]

Millennium People, for a number of critics, confirms the impulse towards violence as a means 'to provide a way of sharpening consciousness, quickening the vital reactions and rejuvenating life'.[108] Andrezj Gasiorek, in his seminal study, argues that 'the flip side of [the] transfigurative dream' which underlines the pretensions toward resistance in *Millennium People,* 'is a pessimistic reading of human life that is characterised by biomorphic horror and existential dread'.[109] For Cord, the novel is 'a profound enquiry into the possibilities of critical thought and dissident action in the 21st century' and that 'in the eventual failure of this revolution [in which] Ballard overtly

[105] J. G. Ballard and Jeanette Baxter, 'Age of Unreason', *The Guardian Online* (22 June 2004) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/jun/22/sciencefictionfantasyandhorror.jgballard> [accessed 25 November 2018]: Republished as 'Reading the Signs' in J. G. Ballard, *Extreme Metaphors: Interviews with J.G. Ballard 1967–2008,* ed. by Simon Sellars and Dan O'Hara (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), 407–414 (p. 413).
[106] Ballard and Baxter, 'Reading the Signs', p. 410.
[107] Ballard and Baxter, 'Reading the Signs', p. 411
[108] Jake Huntley, 'The Madness of Crowds: Ballard's Experimental Communities', in *J.G. Ballard: Visions and Revisions*, ed. by Jeanette Baxter and Rowland Wymer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 215–229 (p. 227).
[109] Gasiorek, *Ballard,* p. 205.

stages the futility of received modes of resistance which almost his entire oeuvre is a reaction to'.[110] Protest, resistance and violence – like the transgression against an accelerationist utopia – are sought as restorative practices, revitalising the alienated and blasé subject from their inertia. However, it is necessary to now reframe and readdress the failure of resistance within his late novels so to acknowledge the important investment in transgression as an (a)political mode of resistance and as basis for the greater, philosophical negation of the politics and values of modernity.

Millennium People charts the (d)evolution from transgression to revolution to nihilism, within a dystopian society. *Millennium People* picks up where *Super-Cannes* left off, accelerating resistance down a bleak warren of transgression and psychopathology that suggests an increasing complicity on the part of the offending subject towards their own social and subjective despair. As protest and remonstration mutates into an acceleration of negativity, the political dimension of *Millennium People* is completely undermined and overshadowed in the wake of a more thoroughgoing, existential and pessimistic protest against self and the advocacy of meaninglessness as 'the last throw of the dice'.[111] In what follows I recall the crucial tension and links between 'pure' destructiveness (or more specifically, a terminal version of transgression, that is, a transgression that rushes beyond any boundaries of meaning into a void,) and meaningful resistance. I thus foreground the failures and potential possibilities that an acceleration of transgression, (which amounts to a self-destructive and somewhat masochistic embrace of negativity), offered in *Millennium People*.[112]

Recognisable modes of protest and their failure are the antagonistic catalyst for the novel's undercurrent of pessimism and the growing attractiveness to a psychopathological alternative. For Kay Churchill, the figurehead of the increasingly chaotic and satirical 'middle-class proletariat' protest movement, the middle-classes are the 'victims of a centuries-old conspiracy, at last throwing off the chains of duty and civic responsibility'.[113] Fuelled by the discourse of the radical Left, Kay argues that the middle-classes are an enslaved and indentured group who have grown

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[110] Cord, *J. G. Ballard's Politics,* p. 17.
[111] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 139.
[112] In Ballard and Baxter, 'Age of Unreason', Ballard suggests that 'along with our passivity, we're entering a profoundly masochistic phase […]. And how much we enjoy it'. Such an outlook seems to confirm that as a culture we have unconsciously fallen prey to what Lyotard pessimistically forewarned – namely a life under capitalism in which we enjoy our victimhood.
[113] Ballard, *Millennium People,* pp. 9; 64.

accustomed to, and have been perversely conditioned into an indebtedness towards this situation, 'like the factory workers of a hundred years ago'.[114] While Karl Marx and subsequent Marxists would disagree with this prognosis, arguing instead that the possibility of a middle-class revolution would be an impossibility, the Chelsea Marina protesters nonetheless remain convinced of their suffering and alienation, and committed to (re)action.

In some ways the Chelsea Marina protests are reminiscent of protest movements like 'Occupy', or even the Arab Spring, as protests against socio-economic inequality, government and corporate abuses of freedoms and corruption, and social injustice. The 'Occupy' movement protesters, particularly, demanded an alternative to the current hegemonic logic of neoliberal democracy that, for them, was no kind of democracy at all. One of the key criticisms laid at the movement cited the futility of its disparate and non-violent methods and its lack of a clear objective, compounded in the noncommittal rhetoric of one its foremost intellectual backers, Noam Chomsky, who claims that as for methods of resistance: '[t]here is no single way of doing it. There is no one answer'.[115] In *Millennium People,* Kay Churchill's protest, similarly, manifests in recourse against tangible political and cultural targets. These targets include a banking and finance system that demands people repay exorbitant mortgages; BBC propaganda that supports political neoliberalism in Britain, the National Film Theatre – or BFI Southbank – and is considered a further toxic influence on bourgeoisie culture; and travel agents and the tourism industry. Underlying the energy and anger of the 'over-educated revolutionaries' is a fundamental and contrary desire to protest against themselves, a protest, which otherwise finds scant release.[116]

Confirming the disenchantment that the contemporary subject feels, Gould and Markham present a bleak indictment that echoes the similarly despairing opinions of the likes of Tyler Durden and Mr. Whittier, in Palahniuk's *Haunted* alluded to in Chapter Two:

> People don't like themselves today. […] We tolerate everything, but we know that liberal values are designed to make us passive. […] We believe in progress and the power of reason, but are haunted by the darker sides of human nature. […] We believe in equality but hate the underclass. We fear our bodies and, above all, we fear death. We're

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114 Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 64.
115 Noam Chomsky, *Occupy* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 75.
116 Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 3.

> an accident of nature, but we think we're at the centre of the universe.[117]

The sense of existential disenchantment thus revealed exposes the core concern of the protestations, which is masked by or transposed on towards tangible political and cultural targets. The middle-class rebels are portrayed as a self-loathing, despairing collective whose "cause" is underpinned by a disdain towards their own culture and lives and who are conscious of the fact that 'they know *they* are the enemy'.[118] The question asked of the protesters, however, is to what extent does their passion and self-hatred manifest into radical action with the gravitas to upset the 'self-regulating' order and truly negate their liberal, civic sense of morality, on which the system relies and without which 'society would collapse'.[119]

After the "Bonfire of Volvos", a catastrophic spectacle of protest in which the Chelsea Marina estate became the site of a tense standoff between the protesters and the authorities, and the protester's perceived "victory", Markham considers the implications of their "revolution". 'We had won, but what exactly?' he asks, rhetorically:

> I have overturned cars and helped to fill Perrier bottles with lighter fuel, but a tolerant and liberal society had smiled at me and walked away […] I understood now why Richard Gould had despaired of Chelsea Marina[120]

Markham's sceptical observations are astute and he is later vindicated when it emerges that government and the police had allowed and facilitated the revolution as they sought to learn how to manipulate, pacify and negate such revolts in the future. It seems that the protesters, bored by their all too comfortable lives, just wanted some kind of drama to break up the mundanity and tedium, before falling back into their old habits. In this, the novel is scathingly critical of much of the intellectual and political Left. Kay, for example, can be read as a caricature of those who are perhaps better described as being contrary. Many of them, like Kay Churchill, have become influential, celebrity figures, publishing and giving TV interviews rehearsing an idiosyncratic position that challenges the 'common sense' position and critiques the complacencies of their allies on the Left, but without professing any viable solutions.

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[117] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 139.
[118] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 109.
[119] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 104.
[120] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 234.

Anarchy and protest should have provided what the likes of Chomsky and Critchley describe as 'a powerfully refreshing and remotivating response, to the drift and demotivation of liberal democracy'.[121] However, the failure of the revolution is clear from the fatigued and dystopian outset of the novel, wherein 'protest banners sagged from balconies' in 'the deserted estate'.[122] Despite the efforts of the protesters, the middle-class "revolution" could not usurp a neoliberal culture that, resembling Hardt and Negri's "Empire" and Baudrillard's "Perfect Crime", seems to have colonized virtually all spaces in reality, and is deeply embedded at an unconscious level.[123] Indeed, Ballard's engagement with protest and revolution confirms the uselessness of a traditional, (anti)political solution to a supra-political problem. It is a failure that in some ways inverts Sylvère Lotringer's critique of a generation of postmodern leftist critics, spitting into the wind of neoliberal capitalism.[124] For Ballard, the Chelsea Marina protest is a *revolution* bereft of *revolutionaries*. That is, *Millennium People* foregrounds a valid radical cause in the thoroughgoing destruction of the neoliberal scaffolding of western culture (i.e. the media; financial securities and the housing market, bureaucracy, liberal bourgeois morality) bereft of the agents capable of following their discontent through into political and cultural anarchy. The bourgeois rebels ultimately cannot shed their all-too comfortable and well-mannered habits. These are, after all, protesters who clean up their mess after the protests and return burnt-out cars to their parking bays.

Chelsea Marina was an absurd 'experiment that didn't come off', and despite an admirable 'passion and wrongheadedness', it falls with aplomb into that ever-growing category of 'heroic failure'.[125] The failure of the protests to achieve any substantial political gains or, indeed, any pressing sense of existential self-worth or re-vitalisation, becomes a cause of further despair. This in part contributes to Richard Gould's disenchantment with the movement and his subsequent, violent fundamentalist breakaway. Gould goes beyond the transgressions of the Chelsea Marina protesters in his quest for a real alternative. Gould's terrible and destructive actions correspond with Critchley's contention that:

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[121] Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, p. 93.
[122] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 3.
[123] Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, p. 93; Hardt and Negri, *Empire* (2001); Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime,* trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1996): See also Chapter One of Thesis.
[124] Sylvère Lotringer, 'Exterminating Angel: Introduction to *Forget Foucault*' in Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2007 [1977]), 7–26 (p. 11).
[125] Ballard, *Millennium People,* pp. 273; 199.

> The massive structural dislocations of our times can invite pessimism,
> even forms of active or passive nihilism […], but they can also invite
> militancy and optimism, an invitation, finally, for our ethical commitment
> and political resistance.[126]

Whether his brand of revolution holds water or not, it is he who is the revolutionary of the novel. He ultimately offers a (questionable) pathway towards self-fulfilment within an inescapable space of neoliberal capitalism, otherwise lacking in the non-committal and fragile resistance of the Chelsea Marina residents.

The acceleration of neoliberal capitalism has led to a situation of almost pathological despair and exhaustion against which the subject is seemingly unable to respond or resist in any viable or meaningful way. For Jean Baudrillard, writing in the 1990s, this is because 'we are accelerating into a void, because all the goals of liberation are already behind us'.[127] The very idea of resistance or radical critique, he ominously claims, 'no longer exist'.[128] While the failed resistance of the Chelsea Marina protests spectacularly confirms this grim prognosis, the novel does however offer one last radical redeeming feature. In the final section of this chapter, then, I examine the extent to which Gould presents a valid image for radicalism that may be extrapolated into a philosophical or subjective (if not political or social) context or application. As the middle-class protests throughout the novel are a symptom of the wider lack of a viable political and transgressive alternative, in much the same way as the violent and criminal actions desired by the residents of Eden-Olympia are, the lack of a constructive, or game-changing outcome confirms the way in which the system negates the possibility of the transgressive as a threat. For the likes of Gould, this game-changing possibility is, however, possible through a nihilistic acceleration of violence and a certain amount of recoding of our values and ethics to transgress and to rebel.[129] Indeed, the failure of the Chelsea Marina protests becomes the inflammatory catalyst for a self-destructive, spiteful and critical stand off against contemporary culture characterized by a violent and nihilistic philosophy and an advocacy of what I refer to as "terminal" transgression.

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[126] Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, p. 131.
[127] Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena,* trans. by James Benedict (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 3–4.
[128] Baudrillard, *Transparency of Evil*, p. 11.
[129] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 13.

In his notable work on Ballard, Florian Cord links the possibility for political resistance in Ballard's fiction to the 'right to catastrophe', to 'show that [it] can be read as developing a new discourse of resistance, one whose emergence is intimately linked with the passage towards late capitalism'.[130] Cord's approach is astute, although it is also prudent to examine not only the spectacle of the catastrophe (i.e. the standout or real act or event) but to consider also the 'terminal' nature of the problem. In short, to read the moment of violence or catastrophe as a symptom of and an eruption within a much lengthier, even more austere transgressive, existential stratagem; one that is not reactionary, but presents a fundamental and nihilistic challenge to the moral/ethical scaffolding of contemporary neoliberal culture. What is clear then, is that the violent acts themselves are not particularly important, but instead it is the thought processes and psychopathological intercessions that have led to violence being considered as the only remaining method of recourse, that is paramount to understanding the critical pathways developed in this fiction.[131] The negation of a conspicuous political bias or purpose and the advocacy of a more terminal and self-defeating response, throughout the novel, represents a subversive attack against the political system and the political subject in totem and, crucially, abets the desired protest 'against themselves'.[132]

A former doctor working with terminally ill and severely disabled children, Gould possesses 'a certain kind of integrity that was rare in the corporate world of corridor politics taking over our lives'.[133] Through his work, Gould confronts a world in which meaningless suffering is a constituent of day-to-day life and grows to believe that instead of trying to rationalise everything, a dire acceptance of meaninglessness should form the basis of an essentialist, re-vitalising and existential philosophy. Gould is the antagonistic outsider that the radical factions and the genuinely despairing and disenchanted characters of *Millennium People* crave. Markham, particularly, who is 'just waiting to be shocked' and dreaming passionately of resistance and of violence, is particularly infatuated.[134] When the Heathrow bombing occurred he admits that something awoke in himself and from that moment sets on a path towards exploring

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130 Cord, *J. G. Ballard's Politics,* p. 10.
131 Cord, *J. G. Ballard's Politics,* p. 194.
132 Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 109.
133 Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 140.
134 Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 161.

his increasing taste for genuinely radical, psychopathological action.[135] When he states how '[he] searched the rows of determined faces for a genuinely disturbed mind, some deranged loner eager to live out a dream of violence', he also reveals a darker determination to locate his own unconscious or unmediated and free self just as despair forces the narrator of *Fight Club* to locate Tyler Durden, another prophetic figure of deranged resistance, or Patrick Bateman, in *American Psycho,* to turn to fantasies of violence to stimulate some lost sense of meaning or feeling.[136]

In stark contrast to Kay Churchill, who argues that those 'who use violence have to be responsible' in their rebellious protests against the auspices of neoliberal capitalism, Gould's strategy is summed up as the desire to completely tear up the rules, 'to invent zero […] so he won't be afraid of the world'.[137] Gould's rebellion is opposed to those defiant strategies of protest that are underpinned by a desire to create or forward an alternative set of socio-political values premised on ethical and economic fairness and responsibility. Instead, his is the pursuit of the irresponsible destruction – through domestic terrorism – of all values and the valorisation of meaninglessness and nothingness as a conduit for the almost libidinous and subversive recreation of meaning from that which is considered excremental, disvalued and meaningless (or, just as accurately: valueless) within neoliberal capitalism. Or as Markham recalls:

> This ruthless and desperate man was pointing the way to a frightening truth. A legion of nonentities were multiplying the tables of a new mathematics based on the power of zero, generating a virtual psychopathology from their shadows.[138]

The antagonism against everything resembles the position taken by the controversial philosopher and critic, Nick Land, whose contempt for the contemporary is equally as palpable. Although Land's vision tends towards a somewhat masochistic, accelerated dissolution within the mechanics of capitalism and is perhaps more reminiscent of Wilder Penrose's prescribed psychopathology in *Super-Cannes,* the end-game is a similar self-destructive vacation/alienation from moral and political

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135 Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 68.
136 Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 38: See also Chapter One and Chapter Two of this thesis for greater discussion about *American Psycho* (1991) and *Fight Club* (1996).
137 Ballard, *Millennium People,* pp. 56; 276–7.
138 Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 271.

capacities.[139] Like Land, Gould seeks the devaluation of the highest values in western philosophy, harbouring the same desire to fatally (re)discover zero and espouses a similar vision of 'radical alienation as the only escape from a human inheritance that amounts to imprisonment in a biodespotic security compound to which only capital has the access code'.[140] In so doing, Gould's resistance is weighted with a fatal or terminal sense of urgency and pessimism that is not resolved through the politics or protest, but through destruction, libidinous gravitas (as per Markham's desire for violence and spectacle) and the proliferation of negativity into ethical and political thought.

Gould's outlook is spiteful, morally vacuous and dangerous, stemming from nihilism and from a Bataillean sense of heterological, excremental disruption resembling a desire for transgression that erupts in order to threaten and frighten stability. Benjamin Noys argues that Bataille's heterological vision is that of an interruption of 'excremental forces that void value', or an eruption of excess that forms a site of 'equivocation and reversal', creating 'crisis and waste' far beyond the 'limited' waste of capitalism.[141] Subsequently, meaningless violence, for Gould, is an opportunity to go beyond contemporary society's empty values and to 'emerge from the void'.[142] When a pointless crime is committed throughout the novel, the human response is to wait for a logical answer, and yet when 'a young woman lies dead on her doorstep […] [w]e listen, and the universe has nothing to say. There's only silence, so we have to speak'.[143] Gould's argument is that meaningless violence demonstrates the invalidity of an entire post-enlightenment, western moral-ethical discourse and the vital need to retake initiative to subvert these and to create 'a new kind of sense'.[144]

As the novel continues to pour scorn on the effective validity of the Chelsea Marina protesters, a revitalisation and acceleration of nihilism, spoken in terms of a terminal collapse of the moral scaffolding of neoliberal contemporary society becomes increasingly evident. In one such instance, Gould directly challenges Markham to

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[139] See also: Land, *Thirst for Annihilation* (1992), in which he argues that chaos and dissolution emerges as counters of modern philosophical complacencies and that *nihil* and 'Zero is fatally discovered beneath the scabrous crust of logical negativity' (p. 15). Moreover, the active devaluation of the highest values is, for Land, a 'convulsion at the zenith of nihilism, that aborts the human race' (p. 103).
[140] Mackay and Avanessian, *#Accelerate,* p. 20.
[141] Noys *Malign Velocities*, p. 74.
[142] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 261.
[143] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 261.
[144] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 136.

reassess his innate belief in society and in himself, his critique is also indirectly targeted towards the disenchanted, middle-class, liberal citizen whom he resents:

> Look closely in the mirror, David. What do you see? Someone you don't like very much. […] Already the future was receding, the bring dreams were slipping below the horizon. By now you're a stage set, one push and the whole thing could collapse at your feet. […] The "you" you've become isn't your real self.[145]

Such statements form the basis of Gould's speculative pathway towards the transvaluation of values and overcoming of the crippling nihilism of the contemporary society which he laments. Gould's characterization of reality as a stage set, fragile and fake, is a challenge to Markham not to accept what he perceives as a mediated, delimited and uninspiring existence. Moreover, Gould here prescribes that Markham would be better off collapsing the whole charade of his life, hurtling himself through the void and renouncing meaning and value, so to escape his anesthetized, neoliberal existence.

Gould's is a desire, then, for an apocalypse in which values and society are decomposed and voided and from which a chance is presented 'to break through the sterility of a failed capitalism and leap into a new future'.[146] To highlight the point, Gould describes how 'the deaths [at Heathrow] were pointless and inexplicable', but the need to fatally and irreversibly distance oneself from our obsession with meaning is necessary.[147] He argues:

> A motiveless act stops the universe in its tracks. […] To keep the world sane we depend on motive, we rely on cause and effect. Kick those props away and we see that the meaningless act is the only one that has any meaning.[148]

Gould's thesis resonates with Simon Critchley's suggestion that 'meaninglessness [is] an achievement' and that nihilism, applied critically, promotes the conception of new values and ethics that re-evaluate and placate human experience and finitude.[149] That said, it is also an undoubtedly irrational and fatalistic project fuelled by contempt for the contemporary world that seeks to counter the deprivations of neoliberal capitalism by breaking loose from the prison of human subjectivity which has emerged as a slave

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[145] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 138.
[146] Noys, *Malign Velocities*, p. 73.
[147] Ballard *Millennium People,* p. 255.
[148] Ballard *Millennium People,* p. 255.
[149] Critchley, *Very Little…*, p. 27.

to the abstractions and deterritorialization of capitalism. Ballard's bold and controversial characterization of Gould's philosophy is a grave provocation to those holding to their failing forms of resistance and to those who consider nihilism as an alternative.

As we have seen then, *Millennium People* satirically undermines the bourgeois model of revolution-through-protest and is an unapologetic provocation to those who consider an application of nihilistic destruction as necessary. As outlined by Gould in the novel, 'we're all bored, […] desperately bored', and like children left to their own devices for too long, we 'have to start breaking up the toys, even the ones we like'.[150] Disaffected subjects, if pushed sufficiently by despair, malaise or discontent, will always turn to violence and destruction to experience some lost or denied form of feeling, activity or affect that is completely at odds with the mundanity of their otherwise unsatisfactory condition. The act of violence (or catastrophe) itself is of little importance: 'absurd – completely pointless, in fact', but Gould and his followers' acts of violence and random murder feed into an ever more spiteful terminal strategy of absolute resistance and negation: '[it was] a matter of momentum', keeping the wheels turning and feeding their ambition.[151] Indeed, for Markham '[t]he firebombing of the NFT was a glimpse of a more real world. […] [His] quest for Laura's murderer was a search for a more intense and driven existence'.[152] In this way, the novel outlines the co-dependence and schisms between the passive nihilism of post-political western society (a society of passivity and simulated existence, or that of Markham's life pre-Heathrow Bomb) and the radical, destructive nihilism of Gould's desired radicalism and terrorism.[153]

When 'antagonism is foreclosed in the politics of consensus', Bülent Diken argues, 'spite […] becomes the only political (re)action'.[154] Through a desire for transgression that combines revolutionary impotence with a desire for, or perverse enjoyment of, modalities of violence, suffering and meaninglessness, Gould's is a spiteful resistance that harms the self as much as society in its subversive and

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[150] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 115.

[151] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 137.

[152] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 144.

[153] Bülent Diken's seminal study, *Nihilism* (2009a), echoes precisely this sentiment and follows with a questioning as to whether it is possible to imagine a radical society, counter to the ever-accelerating, neoliberal-capitalist societies of *Millennium People,* and of course, *Super-Cannes* as previously discussed.

[154] Diken, *Nihilism,* p. 5.

negating tendencies. Thus Gould's desire is for a perfect form of nihilism (or 'anti-nihilism') which 'seeks its own limits, turns against itself and destroys itself, to create immanent values'.[155] Markham's defence of Gould's motiveless / untargeted resistance is informative here, this isn't 'pure nihilism', he states, but the opposite: '[i]t's a search for meaning. […] a truly pointless act of violence, shooting at random into a crowd, grips our attention for months. The absence of rational motive carries a significance of its own'.[156] When people know their lives are pointless there emerges, for Gould and his disciples, 'a deep need from meaningless action, the more violent the better' as a truly radical and resistant counter.[157] Gould's affront to the acceptable is manifested in the desire for catastrophe and for a series of 'spiteful' and increasingly terminal actions that promote the synthesis of antagonistic (self)destruction and affirmation.

By the end of the novel the body count attributable to Gould's psychopathological demands becomes indefensible. After the Heathrow bombing, the bombing of the Tate modern and the murder of the TV presenter on her own doorstep, meaningless violence as an abstract thought experiment jars against the real effects of violence, in reality. This kind of violence recalls the various instances of terroristic, fundamentalist and state-sponsored attacks that plague communities across the globe, particularly within the twenty-first century, wherein everyday life has been so often punctuated by indiscriminate massacres, suicide bombings, random violent attacks and an increasingly abrasive and inflammatory right-wing cultural and political rhetoric. Violence, for fundamentalist and nihilistic militant terrorists, as is evident in the narrative of Bin Laden's early speeches, is an affective spectacle that becomes, for the offenders, the only remaining option to stave off a socio-political enemy.[158] Nihilistic, violent terrorism, by this narrative, is a purely reactionary and defensive strategy against the threat of globalised neoliberalism, one adopted by Gould. For the disillusioned, grieving protester Rev. Stephen Dexter this becomes unpalatable and cannot be allowed to continue. As Gould and his associate, Vera Blackburn, may or may not be plotting an assassination attempt on the Home Secretary and/or Sally and David Markham, Dexter takes no chances and assassinates them both, ending

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[155] Diken, *Nihilism,* p. 31.
[156] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 194.
[157] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 249.
[158] See: Osama Bin Laden, *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden,* ed. by Bruce Lawrence (London: Verso, 2005).

Gould's obsession with chaotic and meaningless violence as a pathway towards *a new kind of sense*.

As the novel ends, the revolution seems definitively over. The local council pays for a massive clean-up and the protagonists, like Kay Churchill and Markham, continue with their lives, looking back fondly on their protest but ever more firmly embedded in the middle-class institutions they had sought to transgress. Markham, it is suggested, will become the director of the Alder, whereas Kay signs a book deal to tell her story about the revolution and becomes a successful political commentator and TV personality. Following the end of the revolt, the residents of Chelsea Marina returned home and the sense of terminal inertia felt early in the novel resettles over an estate that seems waiting for some cataclysmic event to shock them into action.[159] Both *Millennium People* and *Super-Cannes* dejectedly end where they began. In fact, each end with the authorities and the systems which govern everyday life arguably in an even stronger position of control. In *Millennium People,* having appeased the protesters and swept their transgressions away, the bourgeoisie are left with only a faint sense of embarrassment at the absurdity over the whole affair. Despite this, for some, like Markham, the whole affair is viewed as a 'heroic failure' and 'a blueprint for the social protests of the future'.[160] The irony here is palpable, if Chelsea Marina – a protest doomed to failure – is the model for successful social protests then there may well be no viable mode of transgressive alternative after all and, rather pessimistically, the thought itself may very well just be 'preposterous'.[161]

Conclusion

Despite Richard Gould's psychopathological outlook, his dreams of violence and his pathological will to commit even more atrocities, he is remembered fondly in the novel:

> He was trying to find meaning in the most meaningless times, the first of a new kind of desperate man who refuses to bow before the arrogance of existence and the tyranny of space-time. He believed that the most pointless acts could challenge the universe at its own game.[162]

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[159] Ballard, *Millennium People,* pp. 6; 5.
[160] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 293.
[161] Ballard and Baxter, 'Reading the Signs', p. 34
[162] Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 292.

Gould's 'honourable' commitment to psychopathological and terminal transgression marked his 'strange grip on the world' and in many ways resembled the nihilistic ethics of self-destruction.[163] In a scenario of capitalist absolutism, that is, a scenario in which no viable or imaginable alternative to the ever-accelerating proliferation of neoliberal capitalism and abstraction Berardi argues that a desire for 'annihilating nihilism' (a terminal nihilism which actively produced *nihil* as its effect) as a counter-measure takes over.[164] Gould's prescription of meaningless violence, read through this frame, takes on greater significance as a spiteful mode of alterity: '[v]iolence, as Richard Gould once said, should be gratuitous, and no serious revolution should ever achieve its aims'.[165] Throughout the novel he becomes a mythical figure, sermonizing from his own 'bizarre' world and, like the misguided and pathological 'heroes' of Berardi's study, was committed to self-destruction and prepared to 'sacrific[e] everything to his quest for truth, an exhausted captain still ready to feed his own masts into the furnace'.[166] While Markham on the surface abhors the annihilation he encounters, he remains intrigued by and subconsciously desires the possibility afforded to him by such irrational acts that carry undoubted metaphorical importance as fantasies of escape and exertions of (an otherwise unfulfilled) power. Resultantly Gould's provocations embody the central conceit raised by the abstract fantasy of terminal transgression. This provocative brand of resistance within the novel offers the offending subject (at least in the abstract) a means to negate their disappointment, an escapism into meaninglessness in the form of a 'sit-in against the universe'.[167]

In the prescription of transgression in *Super-Cannes* and nihilism in *Millennium People,* it is possible to build on what Gasiorek describes as a 'desire to awaken to a more passionate world, revivifying existence [and] restoring vitalism in place of banal routine', as central to the premises of these novels.[168] Both novels provide a scope through which to measure the extent that acceleration and transgression are resistant to or complicit in the extension of an ever-more dystopian future. Whilst the cruelty, nihilism and ethical unviability of cultural/political accelerationism proves there is much to overcome, the acceleration of transgression within the hyper-neoliberal

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163 Ballard, *Millennium People,* pp. 292; 291.
164 Berardi, *Heroes*, p. 88.
165 Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 293.
166 Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 178.
167 Ballard, *Millennium People,* p. 24.
168 Huntley, 'The Madness of Crowds', p. 227.

environment or culture proves a vital, aesthetic means of imagining a radical future and of (re)enthusing the transgressive subject otherwise restrained by their malign postmodern existence. As I have established throughout this chapter, Ballard's late fictions demonstrate a critical value in grotesque and often excessive scenes of despairing individuals and groups engaging in nihilistic acts/fantasies of resistance, violence and self-destruction. However, underling these actions is an arbitrary and pessimistic sense of complicity with the systems being negated. Critchley argues that 'resistance begins by occupying and controlling the terrain upon which one stands, where one lives, works, acts and thinks'.[169] In the environments described by Ballard, the human subject rarely seems in control at all. Even in the destruction wrought against the neoliberal systems and postmodern culture in the novels, the measure of control a resistant body has is hugely debateable (as is alluded to before Sinclair's murderous rampage in *Super-Cannes* and the Chelsea Marina protests).

It is hard to see how resistance and transgression in the novels can be read as successful. The extent to which the desiring subject becomes complicit in their own dissolution into the system is clear in their failure to articulate a viable response to their discontent outside of the parameters of the system itself. In so doing, a subject's transgressions become less the violent renege against the machinations of postmodern and neoliberal culture, than acts which further tie a subject to these systems at both physical and psychosocial levels. What happens in Ballard's work here is that the only possibility of escape is (an impossible and total) dissolution of both society itself and the individual subject as a rational or moral being. This confirms my contention that the rethinking of transgression and resistance is necessary, that resistance must begin by occupying and challenging the ethical and logical make-up of the subject, as opposed to being rigidly fixated on tangibility and the socio-political situation. Moreover, and in light of the futility of resistance in these novels, it is important to consider that it is rare for transgressive fiction (a mode that expressly deviates from realist forms toward dark and intangible fantasy) to call for a total or viable overhaul of capitalist social structures. Instead, transgressive fictions are more concerned with experimentation and the exploration of personal and subjective alternatives to or escape from these structures. They reinsert excess and overflow (be it of violence, pathology – or mental freedom) as a means by which to experiment with

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[169] Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding,* p. 114.

a somewhat masochistic and desired subjective or existential terminus that exceeds the limit of what is indeed possible within an ever more dystopian world. That is, a world that is represented as an intense and malign form of realism or absolutism that increasingly takes hold of all capacities for radical dissent.

As has become clear, particularly in the pessimistic and dejected tone of Ballard's later fictions, the futility and failure to which transgressions – in the real world and in the literary text – respond to material and metaphysical or subjective concerns is now a key topic of debate. As evident in Ballard's later fictions, the possibilities and solutions to society's biggest concerns are to be found not in realist forms of literature and art, but through the surreal, the dystopian, the horrific. Ballard once stated that 'the exercise of the imagination is part of the basic process of coping with reality', or the only way of surviving the world we live in is through exploring the possibility of a negation towards the non-realist and the imaginative.[170] These modes are vital in the imagining of and beyond notional and realistic forms of transgression and in exploring the mechanics and the possibilities of self-destruction as a response to material and existential antipathy. Ballard's later fictions are driven by the misguided attempt of protagonists and antagonists to re-establish order and agency in a degenerative world through an accelerated engagement with transgression and self-destructive nihilism. It is the sign of a deeply interesting, shared outlook towards philosophical and aesthetic negativity that Thomas Ligotti's fiction presents similar tropes of self-destruction and nihilistic fatalism to counter the experience of disenchantment and antipathy towards a deeply horrific characterisation of neoliberal hegemony in his corporate horrors. In the final chapter of this thesis, I build on the arguments laid out thus far with regards to self-destruction and the possibility or viability of a negation or alternative to a disconcerting, postmodern and neoliberal hegemony. I do so through a close textual and philosophical engagement with the more recent fiction and critical work of the American horror writer, Thomas Ligotti, such as *Teatro Grottesco, My Work is Not Yet Done* and *The Conspiracy against the Human Race*.

The critical trajectory of this thesis has, to this point, been a notable descent through violence, sadism, perversion and failed revolution as novelists explore the

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[170] J. G. Ballard and Thomas Frick, 'The Art of Fiction' (1984) in J. G. Ballard, *Extreme Metaphors: Interviews with J.G. Ballard 1967–2008,* ed. by Simon Sellars and Dan O'Hara (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), 181–198 (p. 183).

viability (and futility) of transgression as a means of rebelling or escaping their respective neoliberal and corporate-dominated worlds. Thomas Ligotti's fiction, however, is marked by the embrace of these themes – particularly self-destruction – as an imaginative coping mechanism. In this way, Ligotti's fiction presents a fascinating account of (and response to) the cumulative horrors raised through Ballard's exploration of terminal and fatalistic transgression in the wake of increasingly ethereal and mendacious corporate and neoliberal hegemony. With the despair of major characters in the novels of Ellis, Palahniuk and Ballard in mind, I will next examine the distinctively horrific and disconcerting value of pessimism, nihilism, self-destruction and existential abandon as means of articulating a subversive, imaginative alternative to the continuity of insidious and pervasive forms of power and control. In so doing, Chapter Four builds on what has been to a point, a socio-politically-conscious discussion of transgression that culminates in failure, diverging toward the realm of abstract speculation and existential critique within non-realist literatures. What is to be examined next is Ligotti's imaginative staging of discordance and self-destruction as a significant and radical form of alterity and escape from the real, that has throughout this thesis been proposed as an avenue of immense critical importance. As a result, it is important to recognise the extent to which Ligotti's characteristic, narrative and philosophical approach to self-destruction and the total negation of hope strikes an often denied or unconscious chord in a contemporary world that has seemingly exhausted all viable and imaginative alternatives.

CHAPTER FOUR — TRANSGRESSION AND PESSIMISM IN THOMAS LIGOTTI'S WORKPLACE HORRORS[1]

Introduction: Ligotti as a Transgressive Writer, or the Hermeneutics of Horror

Thomas Ligotti's short stories and novellas exhibit the problematic relationship between transgression, pessimism and the increasingly unsettling experience of human existence and work within contemporary Western societies. Within Ligotti's so-called workplace horrors, particularly, I argue that this 'assault on the real' world, as S. T. Joshi describes it, takes the form of a pessimistic engagement with corporate systems, their subjects and an increasing compulsion towards ever more horrific and nightmarish outcomes.[2] Ligotti began publishing his fiction in small presses in the 1980s and has since developed a cult reputation as one of the foremost writers of literary and philosophical horror.[3] More recently, Ligotti has garnered more mainstream and critical attention and is increasingly considered one of the prominent genre horror writers of the last thirty years. Ligotti's horror follows in the traditions of Gothic stalwarts like Edgar Allan Poe and H. P. Lovecraft, but also has echoes in the traditions of transgressive fiction pioneers like Vladimir Nabokov and William S. Burroughs in terms of style and themes, as cited in this thesis' introduction. Stylistically, Ligotti's fictions exhibit a unique sensitivity towards bleakness, his narratives are filled with a litany of beleaguered outsiders, 'misfits' and lunatics who, '[seek] an escape from the "real world" to the grey zones wherein reality is transformed and matter is grossly destroyed', and who struggle to cope within a visibly terrifying,

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[1] Sections of this chapter are direct reworkings of a paper I wrote for The Dark Arts Journal and with the permission of the journal, have been revised here. See Rachid M'Rabty, 'Occupational Hazards: Nihilism and Negation in Thomas Ligotti's 'Corporate Horror'' *The Dark Arts Journal*, 2:1 (2016), 43–67.

[2] S.T. Joshi, 'Thomas Ligotti: The Escape from Life' (1993), in *The Thomas Ligotti Reader: Essays and Explorations,* ed. by Darrell Schweitzer (Holicong: Wildside Press, 2003a), 135–153, (p. 136).

[3] In keeping with this sentiment, Ligotti has been canonised for his literary achievements in this genre by the pre-eminent scholar of weird fiction, S.T. Joshi, in *The Modern Weird Tale* (McFarland: London, 2001).

uncanny and monstrously debilitating universe.[4] Surveying Ligotti is no short task and thus demands a critical awareness of his fiction (and indeed, non-fiction), his critical reception to date and how this fits in within both the contemporary, transgressive and the workplace/neoliberal contexts which this thesis has been concerned with. In the following pages, I will assess each of these concerns, beginning firstly with the critical and thematic overview of Thomas Ligotti.

Since the turn of the century, Thomas Ligotti has been less prolific in terms of publications than in the 80s and 90s, but post-millennial efforts like *My Work is Not Yet Done* (2002) and certain stories within *Teatro Grottesco* (2006) read as some of the most accomplished additions to his oeuvre to date.[5] Moreover, such publications are marked by a more overt engagement with capitalist microsystems that seems both timely and pertinent within the wider context of contemporary transgressive fictions. While such Kafkaesque scenarios allude to the possibility of a critical reading of capitalist and neoliberal systems, Ligotti's intention is for these to facilitate metaphorical engagement with the perceived, wider issue: the futility of existence, drowned in nightmarish and conspiratorial chaos. This is a theme which Ligotti returns to in his study of pessimism and horror, *The Conspiracy against the Human Race* (2010), wherein he outlines the insignificance of humanity through a speculative and pessimistic approach to important existential questions as to the worth and meaning of life and continued human existence.[6]

I will begin this chapter with a short survey of the criticism surrounding Thomas Ligotti and present the case for reading his short stories as highly pessimistic and philosophically unsettling deviations of the transgressive mode, developed in this thesis' introduction and in previous chapters. Following this I will read the philosophy and aesthetic of Ligotti's oeuvre as a transgressive and pessimistic form to

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[4] Ligotti, qtd. in Carl T. Ford, 'Interview with Thomas Ligotti', *Dagon* 22–3 (1988), in *Born to Fear: Interviews with Thomas Ligotti,* ed. by Matt Cardin (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2014)*,* 17–25 (p. 21–2).

[5] Thomas Ligotti, *My Work is Not Yet Done,* (London: Virgin Books, 2009 [2002]). For the sake of brevity will be henceforth referred to as *My Work* (italicised): Thomas Ligotti, *Teatro Grottesco* (London: Virgin Books, 2008). It must also be noted that many of the stories here referred to have appeared in publication prior to their inclusion in the volumes I cite here. I have noted the dates of earliest publications of these stories in square brackets in the footnotes. However, for reasons of chronological and clarity of argument, and due to the often-sizeable revisions Ligotti makes to his fiction between publications, I am referencing the stories as they appear in the volumes here examined. I do so also as recognition of Ligotti's conscious decision to collate certain stories together. This has been done by the author at an editorial level done to make apparent their significance when read alongside one another.

[6] Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy against the Human Race* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2010): For the sake of brevity will be henceforth referred to as *Conspiracy* when referred to.

demonstrate that Ligotti's staging of discordance, pessimism and self-destruction should be read as a significant form of fictional alterity. That his disconcerting literary representations stage an encounter with liminality – the 'acme of philosophical nightmarishness' – and transgression that, for his characters at least, undermines the stability of their very identities and sense of being.[7] Lastly, I explore the strategies of escape in Thomas Ligotti's more contemporary, workplace horrors, specifically, stories that appear in the volume *My Work is Not Yet Done* and related stories in *Teatro Grottesco*. These two volumes, published after the turn of the century (but before the final publication of influential and award-winning non-fiction piece), extrapolate Ligotti's pessimistic philosophy within and beyond much more recognisable real-world and workplace contexts. Through an engagement with death, decay and destruction, Ligotti's pessimistic philosophy translates into the ultimately suicidal and self-destructive strategies of negation evident in his narratives. Here, I examine the extent the transgressive activities and motivations of his monstrous and wayward outsiders demonstrate a valuable, methodological concern with broader existential uses of transgression and pessimism. In so doing, I explore the possibility (or lack) of escape or alternative, which has been under sharp critical focus within transgressive fictions in the later part of the 20th and early 21st centuries.

Transgression, throughout this thesis, has proved a contentious issue. While transgression stages the crossing and/or annihilation of limits, horror undermines distinctions between reality and unreality by staging and literalising the disturbing effects of being caught within this state of liminality. In this sense, and for the purposes of this chapter, transgression becomes an effect and reaction to horror. Specifically, it is the reaction to the existential experience of a darkly sublime and pessimistic literary world that makes unnervingly apparent the depressive and material horror of the real world. While transgressive tropes and themes might have lost some of their ability to shock in recent decades, Ligotti's fiction seems to legitimize and revitalise a litany of transgressive actions as the offending subject attempts to move, one way or another, beyond their traumatic state of liminality. Existing on the cusp of existential catastrophe, Ligotti's characters responses throughout the fiction often culminate in

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[7] Matt Cardin, 'Liminal Terror and the Collective Identity in Thomas Ligotti's "The Shadow at the Bottom of the World"' (2003b) in *The Thomas Ligotti Reader: Essays and Explorations,* ed. by Darrell Schweitzer (Holicong: Wildside Press, 2003a), 85–100 (p. 85).

an attempt to undermine or transgress – that is, to subvert and expose – the perverse and conspiratorial nature of their societies.

Despite the speculative and surreal aspects of his literature, my contention is that it would undoubtedly be reductive to dismiss Ligotti's fictions as an index of contemporary discontent. While a great number of his fictions are not specifically related to the contemporary/neoliberal or capitalist realist context that this thesis has so far tracked, there is a definite increase in political and social awareness under the surface of his millennial and post-millennial works, particularly from the publication of *My Work* onwards. For Ligotti, ultimately 'all organic existence [is] something fundamentally and inescapably evil', to which 'the only escape is death'.[8] Despite this, uncanny parallels between his own nightmare worlds and our own are evident in his fiction in the figure of the alienated worker; the workplace's sadistic approach to labour; the nefarious corporate machinations at work; and the existential strain that the perpetually suffering individual experiences. These should not be understated. Indeed, Ligotti's staging of discordance, particularly in the workplace, and his presentation of often suicidal or self-defeating destruction, signals an important stage in contemporary transgressive fiction, one that seeks to negate any possibility for hope and admonishes optimism in all forms. Citing the prevalence of decay, death and the other in his short fiction, for Thacker, Ligotti, takes an 'uncompromising and absurd[ly]' pessimistic viewpoint, [which] subverts the world-we-know, describing instead, reality as a malignant and persistent nightmare that is (dis)coloured by the poisonous overspill from malevolent and often unknown/unseen powers.[9] To reiterate, it is the contention of this chapter that the supernatural quality of these works is largely metaphorical. It literalizes and makes apparent the pessimistic-realist vision that drives the subject to take self-destructive action as a final means of recourse in the absence of any typically affirmative alternative. On the subject of suicide, that most explicitly self-destructive of actions, Critchley wrote of a perverse rationality wherein 'reason runs headlong into one last, long tunnel with no exit.'[10] Thomas Ligotti's fiction emphasises precisely this point, that self-destruction presents an attempt to negate the prison of existence – the achievement of which is often irrelevant. Aligning the capitalist-realist elements of

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[8] Ligotti, qtd. in Thomas Wagner, 'Work Not Done? An Interview with Thomas Ligotti' *The Art of Grimscribe* [Website] (2003) in *Born to Fear: Interviews with Thomas Ligotti,* ed. by Matt Cardin (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2014)*,* 77–91 (p. 83).
[9] Thacker, *Tentacles Longer Than Night*, p. 158.
[10] Critchley, *Notes on Suicide*, p. 42.

previous chapters with a pessimistic-realist vision of existence, Ligotti's transgressive fiction reads as a philosophically dense obituary to optimistic and affirmative gestures of resistance.

To date little critical material has been published on Ligotti and that which exists is often quite limited in scope, as it primarily positions Ligotti within the narrow spectrum of supernatural horror and weird fiction.[11] The most common critical element to studies of Ligotti tends towards his relation to Lovecraftian themes and stylistics yet this seems disproportionate and limited, tending to conclude with either of the following. Either they claim Ligotti as an apostle of late-twentieth century and post-millennial weird fiction, an apparent heir to Lovecraft, the pre-eminent stylist of this genre, or lament his inability to live up to Lovecraft.[12] Matt Cardin, for example, takes the position that Lovecraft's influence in Ligotti's works is less measured by their content or by a prosaic commitment to following the patterns and criteria of a Lovecraftian narrative. Whereas Joshi posits that Ligotti falls some way short of Lovecraft's supernatural realism, as he 'seems apparently by design, not to care about the complete reconciliation of the […] supernatural'.[13]

In recent years, however, Ligotti has been attracting more critical attention, in no small part due to his imaginative approach to horror and pessimism that states 'existence equals nightmare', exemplified in *Conspiracy* (2010).[14] More widely, from an existential standpoint, pessimistic thought has garnered much more of a critical purchase in the early twenty-first century and has been the subject of noteworthy studies such as Eugene Thacker's *Horror of Philosophy* series (201–15) and *Infinite Resignation* (2018), David Benatar's, *Better Never to Have Been* (2006) and *The Human Predicament* (2017), and Colin Feltham's, *Keeping Ourselves in the Dark*

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[11] See for example: Ben P. Indick, 'The Dream Quest of Thomas Ligotti: A Study of *In A Foreign Town, In A Foreign Land'* (2003) in *The Thomas Ligotti Reader: Essays and Explorations,* ed. by Darrell Schweitzer (Holicong: Wildside Press, 2003a), 116–126; Robert M. Price, 'The Mystagogue, The Gnostic Quest, The Secret Book' (1988) in *The Thomas Ligotti Reader: Essays and Explorations,* ed. by Darrell Schweitzer (Holicong: Wildside Press, 2003a), 32–37; Michael W. Clune, 'Loving the Alien: Thomas Ligotti and the Psychology of Cosmic Horror', *LA Review of Books* (27 January 2016) <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/loving-the-alien-thomas-ligotti-and-the-psychology-of-cosmic-horror/#!>; Peter Bebergal, 'The Horror of the Unreal', *The New Yorker* (29 October 2015) <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-horror-of-the-unreal>.

[12] See for example, Matt Cardin, 'His Masters' Eyes Shining with Secrets: H.P. Lovecraft and His Influence on Thomas Ligotti', *Thomas Ligotti Online* (3 April 2005) <http://ligotti.net/showthread.php?t=218> [accessed 28 February 2019].

[13] Joshi, 'The Escape from Life', pp. 151–2.

[14] Price, 'The Mystagogue', p. 32. Ligotti is now taught on at least one Masters Programme, the MA Gothic Studies, at Manchester Metropolitan. His works and thought are also the subject of an entire literary journal, *Vastarien: A Literary Journal.*

(2015).[15] Notably, however, each of these shares an affinity with Ligotti in their speculative response to the perceived worthlessness of life. Additionally, Ligotti's rising stock as a literary author is exemplified by the recent canonizing move by Penguin Classics to republish his first two collected volumes – *Grimscribe,* and *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* – in their prestigious Classics series and the Penguin republication of *The Conspiracy against the Human Race* in 2018.[16]

The most active Ligotti scholar of recent years, Matt Cardin – writing in 2003 – posited three primary themes emerging from Ligotti's fiction:

> First, the meaninglessness – or possibly malevolence – of the reality principle behind the material universe; second, the perennial instability of this universe of solid forms, shapes, and concepts as it threatens to collapse or mutate into something monstrous and unforeseeable; and third, the nightmarishness of conscious personal experience.[17]

Cardin's assessment is still accurate today. Throughout Ligotti's fiction the meaninglessness of reality, the instability of meaning and its mutation and lastly, the nightmare of consciousness all permeate his fictions. In the pessimistic philosophy which effects his landscapes and narrator's actions, a despairing, 'even nihilistic' outlook is clearly discernible in works that consistently demonstrate an absolutist/purist commitment to the aesthetic of despair.[18] That said, there is more within Ligotti's fiction that Cardin does not cite here. The critical paradigms that have prevailed in the reading of Ligotti thus far, often neglect the important influence of writers like Stefan Grabinsky, Bruno Schulz, Edgar Allan Poe and even Vladimir Nabokov, for example. All these writers Ligotti has cited as having had as much, if not a more pertinent impact and influence on the form and structure of his work. Moreover, his critical engagement with pessimistic existentialism throughout his fiction is arguably even more philosophically and thematically important as it demonstrates a view that breaks with convention, and 'stands in contrast to a "heroic" pessimism that ultimately serves human goals and aspirations'.[19] In light of this, throughout the course of this chapter, I demonstrate that

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[15] Eugene Thacker, *In The Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy vol. 1* (Hants: Zero Books, 2011); Eugene Thacker, *Starry Speculative Corpse: Horror of Philosophy vol. 2* (Hants: Zero Books, 2015a); Thacker, *Tentacles Longer than Night*; Thacker, *Infinite Resignation*; David Benatar, *The Human Predicament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Colin Feltham, *Keeping Ourselves in the Dark* (Charleston, WV: Nine-Banded Books, 2015).

[16] Thomas Ligotti, *Songs of a Dead Dreamer and Grimscribe* (London: Penguin, 2016 [1989 & 1991]); Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy against the Human Race* (London: Penguin, 2018 [2010]).

[17] Matt Cardin, 'Thomas Ligotti's Career of Nightmares' (2003a) in *The Thomas Ligotti Reader: Essays and Explorations,* ed. by Darrell Schweitzer (Holicong: Wildside Press, 2003a), 12–22 (p. 19).

[18] Cardin, 'Career of Nightmares', p. 13.

[19] Thacker, *Tentacles Longer than Night*, p. 162.

there is a resourceful critical value in Ligotti's proactive and pessimistic assault on the reader's predilections and in his excessive / transgressive concern with subjective uncertainty, horror and the theme of escapism (even negation) that deserves to be brought to light.

In one of the earliest critical responses to Ligotti's fiction, Stefan Dziemianovicz alludes precisely to these sentiments, in his study of the recurrent and 'overwhelming force of uncertainty' running through Ligotti's earliest works.[20] Dziemianovicz suggests that Ligotti's fiction 'persuades the reader to accept something inconsistent with what the reader knows to be true'.[21] Although the critic demonstrates great foresight here, he understates how Ligotti's fiction forces the reader into confrontation with an existentially pessimistic worldview as it appears as a realism – that is, as independent of and ulterior to existential misconception. In this way, Ligotti does not mean to 'persuade' us towards accepting his fiction's worldview. As far as the texts are concerned, uncertainty and horror are the rule rather than the exception. Ligotti's presentation of uncertainty and horror as a realism, then, culminates in an assault on the ontological parameters and moral/ethical givens that the uninitiated reader often brings to a text.

In more recent criticism, similar tropes of existential uncertainty are again the subject of contention. Jason Marc Harris, notably focuses on Ligotti's 'misanthropic metaphysics where entropic madness disintegrates rational identity'.[22] Harris's critical examination of Ligotti points to the way Ligotti persistently employs such uncanny figures of transgression such as puppets, clown figures and duplicitous individuals to 'underscore the sense of life as a "perennial nightmare",' in order to complete 'his pessimistic vision of existential misery'.[23] While much of Harris's work here is critically sound, I disagree with misanthropic label he attaches to Ligotti and his fictions, which seems hasty and at odds with the actions of Ligotti's fictional characters. These – as I shall show in this chapter – do not act out of a hatred for humanity, but of a desire to alleviate their own suffering. In this fashion, Sergio Roura considers the nihilistic and

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[20] Stefan Dziemianowicz, '"Nothing Is What It Seems to Be": Thomas Ligotti's Assault on Certainty' (1988), in *The Thomas Ligotti Reader: Essays and Explorations,* ed. by Darrell Schweitzer (Holicong: Wildside Press, 2003a), 27–40 (pp. 38–9).
[21] Dziemianowicz, 'Nothing is What It Seems', p. 38
[22] Jason Marc Harris, 'Doomed Puppets as Fantastic Figures of Absurdity, Chaos and Misanthropy in the Writings of Thomas Ligotti', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 46:6 (2012), 1249–1265 (p. 1250).
[23] Harris, 'Doomed Puppets', p. 1254.

metaphysical terror that permeate Ligotti's fictions as a contrivance which presents a dark, fantastic ontology, more closely associated with the postmodern view of reality as an 'indecipherable entity'.[24] In this sense, as opposed to being some kind of misanthropist, Ligotti's intention is less a rage against humanity, than a thoroughgoing attempt to 'eliminate the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural' to problematize and eradicate any stable notion of reality.[25] Rather than being misanthropic, it might be that, as Thacker has suggested, throughout Ligotti's works 'there is a negativity inherent in everything that exists' which manifests as 'indifference and malignancy'.[26]

In response to these sentiments (indifference and malignancy) and the ontological uncertainty generated by his fictions, the possibility of escape or negation has fascinated many critical readers of Ligotti's works, particularly as the author subverts our expectations of what 'escape' from life should entail.[27] For Christopher Hauke horror is seen as a means to explore a route past limitation.[28] 'In encountering and enjoying horror', he writes:

> What is being sought is a transcendence of the limits of rational consciousness […]. At its core, the horror genre sees our humanness and consciousness not as an enhancement or culmination of Nature but an aberration.[29]

Of a similar mindset, Ligotti concedes that the practice of writing horror is a literal escapism, but 'in a paradoxical way since I [Thomas Ligotti] usually escaped *into* a sort of imaginary hell. Perhaps you might call it *confrontational* escapism'.[30] Levinas argued that the literary 'escape' is manifested as a 'strange disquiet, [that] appears like a condemnation – the most radical one – of the philosophy of our being'.[31] For Levinas, escape in the abstract sense is characterised in a radical disbelief or negation of ontological and tautological givens, it is an escape premised on the confrontation

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[24] Sergio Armando Hernandez Roura, 'Thomas Ligotti: The Delusions of a Broken Mind'/'*Thomas Ligotti: Los Delirios De Una Mente Rota', Brumal*, 1:1 (2013), p. 151 [Original in Spanish].

[25] Roura, 'Delusions'. [Original in Spanish].

[26] Thacker, *Tentacles Longer than Night*, pp. 160; 164.

[27] See Xavier Aldana Reyes and Rachid M'Rabty, 'Better not to have been: Thomas Ligotti and the "Suicide" of the Human Race', in *Suicide and the Gothic,* ed. by William Hughes and Andrew Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 129–38.

[28] Christopher Hauke, 'Horror Films and the Attack on Rationality', *Journal of Analytical Psychology,* 60:5 (2005), 736–40 (p. 736).

[29] Hauke, 'Horror Films', p. 736.

[30] Darrell Schweitzer, '*Weird Tales* Talks with Thomas Ligotti' (1991–2), in *The Thomas Ligotti Reader: Essays and Explorations,* ed. by Darrell Schweitzer (Holicong: Wildside Press, 2003a), 23–31 (p. 24). [Italics in original].

[31] Levinas, *On Escape*, p. 51.

with the horrific 'nausea' of existence and being.[32] Confronted by a similar horror at the nauseating and abhorrent nature of the world they live in, Ligotti's protagonists seek a means of escaping their circumstances. What makes Ligotti's version of escapism interesting is that it does not pertain towards any sense of optimistic release or relief. It is not quite 'the quest for the marvellous', as Levinas put it, describing the fundamental rejection of moral ontology, but instead is just a distraction that inevitably 'counter[s] horror with more horror'.[33] The 'escape from life', as Joshi titled his introductory essay on Ligotti, is a key feature of his work. However, to say, as Joshi does, that this corresponds to a total absence of real-world issues from his texts, is excessive. Ligotti's work does exhibit an escape from life as human characters are repeatedly rendered 'virtually insignificant in themselves […] serving only as embodiments of or conduits to the unreal'.[34] But this 'escape' refers to the active strategies of negation that arise within his texts – namely suicide, which he considers an idealistic motion towards ego-death and the embrace of horror. Many of Ligotti's fictions, particularly those written at and since the turn of the millennium, do, in fact, reference socio-political issues and the real-life experience of organised labour in industrial and post-industrial societies – at least superficially and/or sardonically.

In recognition of this, Darrell Schweitzer has drawn attention to the growing sub-set of Ligotti's works that are explicitly rooted in the real-world terrors related to the corporate world. In such works, Schweitzer argues, Ligotti demonstrates a sardonic tone, 'his stories are not painful, self-pitying cries; they are *appreciations* of the absurdity of existence'.[35] Schweitzer's work has thus introduced an understudied facet to Ligotti's oeuvre, namely, that Ligotti's 'decidedly post-modern' and 'self-aware' corporate horror bridges the chasm between the totally otherworldly and speculative themes of his fiction and the mundane, dissatisfying horrors of real-life experience.[36] As I demonstrate in this chapter, many of the thematic elements alluded to thus far, such as horror, escape and negation or the pushing of ontological boundaries and pessimism, need to be aligned with a speculative, existential and transgressive

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[32] Levinas, *On Escape*, p. 66.

[33] Levinas, *On Escape*, p. 53; Schweitzer, '*Weird Tales* Talks with Thomas Ligotti', p. 24.

[34] Joshi, p. 135: Ligotti qtd. in Neddal Ayad, 'Literature Is Entertainment or It Is Nothing: An Interview with Thomas Ligotti', *Fantastic Metropolis* (Web site) (2004) in *Born to Fear: Interviews with Thomas Ligotti,* ed. by Matt Cardin (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2014)*,* 95–116 (p. 96).

[35] Darrell Schweitzer, 'Thomas Ligotti's Corporate Horror' (2003b) in *The Thomas Ligotti Reader: Essays and Explorations,* ed. by Darrell Schweitzer (Holicong: Wildside Press, 2003a), 127–134 (p. 132).

[36] Schweitzer, 'Corporate Horror', p. 132.

reading of Ligotti's oeuvre. Moreover, the bourgeoning critical engagement with these newfound themes demands a more sustained application and examination of the transgressive and self-destructive elements at work in his stories. For this reason, in the next section I make the case for a transgressive reading of Ligotti's pessimistic, horror fiction, drawing on some of the introductory critical work on Ligotti, works of pessimistic theory, approaches to horror, and revisit some of the critical approaches to transgression, as they are applicable. Ligotti's fiction presents a pessimistic brand of transgressive horror, one which exhibits a similar penchant for excessive transgressive gestures as seen in previous chapters, but which also denies any possibility that such acts/fantasies can be a means of radical change in the wake of the perpetual suffering of the subject.

For Ligotti, the will to self-destruction that follows the disillusionment with one's existence becomes not only a possibility, but also an ethical necessity and vehicle for some kind of vindication or relief in the context of his fiction. The author alludes to this when he states his belief that 'disillusionment can be glamorous too. […] [T]hat something absolutely negative, something that has no affirmation whatever at its base is an impossibility'.[37] Whether such a bleak brand of transgressive fiction holds any value, then, seems dependent on our expectations (or lack thereof) for literature to offer viable alternatives or critiques to real-life discontent. Ligotti is upfront about this: '[l]iterature is a diversion like any other', he argues:

> It's not going to save your soul or your sanity. It's not going to illuminate some ultimate reality. The most a writer can do is sort of allude to some personal concern, however dire and intense it may be, in the course of amusing a reader.[38]

This is particularly pertinent in an age of insidious neoliberalism which co-opts and denigrates radical alternatives to its widely accepted grip and shaping influence on reality. To dismiss Ligotti as a cynical defeatist is to miss the point of his radical, transgressive refusal to accept the perceived fallacies and intellectual blackmail of ethical-humanist philosophy. Ligotti's work demonstrates the horrific reality of the everyday and of the human condition and asks of his characters, and indeed his

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[37] Ligotti qtd. in E.M. Angerhuber and Thomas Wagner, 'Disillusionment can be Glamorous: An Interview with Thomas Ligotti', *The Art of Grimscribe* (website) (2001) in *Born to Fear: Interviews with Thomas Ligotti,* ed. by Matt Cardin (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2014)*,* 59–75 (p. 68).

[38] Ligotti qtd. in Stefan Dziemianowicz, 'Interview with Thomas Ligotti', *Science Fiction & Fantasy Book Review Annual* (1991) in *Born to Fear: Interviews with Thomas Ligotti,* ed. by Matt Cardin (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2014)*,* 27–40 (p. 30).

readers, to what limits are they prepared to be driven to before making a pragmatic assessment as to when enough is enough. Instead, I posit, we should value the utterly bleak and satirical tone of his work as an accurate register of a vehemently pessimistic and widespread contemporary existential malcontent. In this sense, his fiction exhibits more than a simple transgressive gesture. It deconstructs the perceived baseless positivist discourses that sustain neoliberal power and the denigration of the human subject, showing up our very existence as a zero-sum game and perennial nightmare. Moreover, it takes the reader beyond conventional limits and to a place of sheer horror: a place that transgresses transgression, so to speak, from which there seems to be only one way out.

Ligotti, Pessimistic Realism and the Suffering of Existence

Ligotti's fictional engagement with the suffering of the world suggests that it is entwined with the corporate economic and social ties attached to human and social life. In this sense, it is more radical to see Ligotti as a total nihilist, rallying against life itself, insofar as he denies any potential redemption of conscious life and its organisation (society, politics). As a result, this section aims to provoke a questioning of his art as a negotiation of the acceptable and the unacceptable at the limit of reason and rationality and the viability of his pessimistic thesis. In this section, I argue that Thomas Ligotti's *Teatro Grottesco* (2006) is explorative of the suggestion that, ultimately, there exists no viable sense of escape or affirmation that is compatible with continued existence. As a distraction – or even as entertainment – transgression in the typical sense (as an act, movement or conceit to the allure of the negative or the unacceptable) has a role, certainly, but as a 'solution' it is found to be grossly underwhelming and chimerical. Unlike in more traditionally recognised transgressive fiction, Ligotti's fiction does not simply state the identity and society-forming tensions at a supposed boundary or limit. This is because Ligotti determines that existence at every stage is a thoroughgoing experience of unrelenting pain and suffering and as a species, we would be better off without the trouble. This culminates in his ethical argument for a collective cessation or resignation from life itself that is consistent with his 'primary concern [of] eliminating

suffering, or diminishing it significantly' within society.[39] From a position of metaphysical nihilism, Ligotti's fiction in *Teatro Grottesco* literalizes otherwise imaginary or unconscious and horrific phenomena representative of the longsuffering existential angst felt by his characters. As a result, this body of work presents an intriguing study of the response to aesthetic and ontological negativity and extreme pessimism that stands antithetical to any sense of anthropocentric authority, limit or organising principle.

Teatro Grottesco is a collection of 13 short stories collated from Ligotti's back-catalogue of short fiction published throughout the 90s and 00s, arranged into three sections: 'Derangements', 'Deformations' and 'The Damaged and the Diseased'. Stories collected in the first section introduces the reader to the Ligottian cosmos, a space in which reality is not what it seems, and the presence of a supernatural, conspiratorial and mendacious influence behind the very lose curtain of 'sanity' and reality are unsettlingly alluded to. The second section features cynical and pessimistic representations of the somewhat uncanny and depressive workplaces of industrial and post-industrial communities. The final section focuses more specifically on the human condition as a thoroughgoing mediation with horror and absurdity. Throughout *Teatro Grottesco,* this underlying unconventionality and horrific seductiveness can be seen in the pessimism underlying these works, and is driven by a perceptive – if not somewhat paranoid – responsiveness to the pain of consciousness and existential angst that must be contended with by his characters. In what is arguably his strongest volume in terms of its commitment to the theme of pessimism in the contemporary world, *Teatro Grottesco* exhibits the transgression of ontological and rational limits, terror and the grotesque in the absurdist plots of each of its thirteen stories.

Transgression is here evident in the underlying antithetical virtues and philosophically unconventional pessimism of these stories. Recalling Kathryn Hume's definition, Ligotti's work shares a similar 'aggressive' tact in its comprehensive attack on the reader's ontological assumptions, more so even than those (like Palahniuk and Ellis) who Hume cites in her paradigm-defining study. It is also possible to identify in *Teatro Grottesco* a version of the unattainable vision of freedom, which Robin Mookerjee cites as one of the defining features of the modern, Burroughsian take on

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[39] Ligotti qtd. in Tina Hall, 'The Damned Interviews: Thomas Ligotti', (2011) in *Born to Fear: Interviews with Thomas Ligotti,* ed. by Matt Cardin (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2014)*, 175–181 (p. 179).

the transgressive tradition. In tales such as 'The Town Manager', 'The Clown Puppet' and 'Our Temporary Supervisor', a similar version of Mookerjee's 'abject helplessness, loss of agency and sadistic domination' is in evidence as characters repeatedly struggle through their meaningless lives, in ways that predicate a complete disregard for self-preservation.[40] It is this self-depreciating disregard that the narrator of 'The Town Manager' refers to when, disillusioned by the ridiculousness of the town's machinations, he decides to walk away from it all: 'I had fled that place', he admits:

> [I]n hopes of finding another that had been founded upon different principles and operated under a different order. But […] It seemed the only course of action left to me was to make an end of it.[41]

In the concluding remarks to his benchmark study of transgression, Chris Jenks argues that transgression is a – if not *the* – defining aspect of individual being. Transgressive behaviour and the seeking out of excessive experiences, is the liberty of those 'who feel trapped, threatened or violently constrained by external forces beyond their control'.[42] Such experiences, however, are often much 'more threatening to their survival' than the experiences from which they are seeking relief or escape. This is evident in 'The Town Manager', as characters are systematically trapped within, and violently constrained by, forces beyond their understanding. In this narrative, life for the town's population becomes a routine of the grotesquely absurd – 'those of us who lived [in the town] functioned as sideshow freaks' – as the abhorrent vision of the unknown malefactor is put into practice.[43]

As Ligotti admits, 'the journeys [his] characters take are always ones of decline and death', which reflect the 'journey of the human race as a whole'.[44] In the 'The Town Manager', conventional life, as a participant citizen of the town, is the adversary which the narrator must overcome, either through acceptance or through a somewhat masochistic, self-destructive resignation and disavowal of the follies and certainties of their reality. At the end of the story, for the narrator at least, negation from this world (no matter the cost), is preferable to the utter meaninglessness of life. Strangely, it is at this point of self-destructive resignation, when he becomes aware of the futility of

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[40] Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction*, p. 72.

[41] Thomas Ligotti, 'The Town Manager', [2003] in *Teatro Grottesco* (London: Virgin Books, 2008), p. 35.

[42] Jenks, *Transgression*, p. 186.

[43] Ligotti, 'The Town Manager', p. 31.

[44] Ligotti qtd. in Jeff VanderMeer, 'Interview with Thomas Ligotti' (2013), in *Born to Fear: Interviews with Thomas Ligotti,* ed. by Matt Cardin (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2014)*, 235–43 (p. 242).

life, that an alternative is presented. Conversely, this alternative is a masochistic escape further *into* the system, in the form of a career in town management. As he puts it, it is 'either that or make an end of it'.[45]

There can be no mistaking the clear echoes of Schopenhauer throughout Ligotti. Schopenhauer argued the necessity of the substitution of negativity and positivity and in doing so, posited that 'all happiness and gratification, is that which is negative'.[46] Similarly, Ligotti's fiction is vehement in its refusal to accept any supposedly chimerical optimistic leanings that would otherwise dilute his existentially disconcerting, grotesque and strangely alluring narrative voice. It is important to recognise that throughout his oeuvre, this negativism does not necessarily correlate with the 'bad', the 'undesirable', or the 'unacceptable'. Instead, negativity becomes the author's muse, and holds a certain attractiveness in its total otherness and unconventionality.[47] Like Schopenhauer, he repudiates the perceived follies of affirmationist ego-centrism that occludes a rational or pragmatic relationship with existence in all its horrific allure. Building on this, Ligotti's fiction suggests a new approach to transgression that responds to the negative realism of the perceived horrific conspiracy against the human subject.

In what follows, I focus more specifically on three of Ligotti's short stories from this volume: firstly, 'The Clown Puppet', 'My Case for Retributive Action', and then 'Sideshow, and Other Stories'. The first two take place primarily in the workplace, initially grounding the existential suffering and horror of existence within nominally recognisable frameworks. The exception is 'Sideshow', which articulates the wider context into which the workplace and the perpetually suffering worker fall. These three stories are exemplary of Ligotti's oeuvre, depicting a cosmos/worldview in which the distinction between the real/unreal or acceptable/unacceptable is dissipated and each present a liminal space in which positivism and optimistic values are nihilistically absent. What remains is an aesthetically alluring bleakness in which all the protagonists, in some form or another, are acutely aware of, and experience, the pain

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[45] Ligotti, 'The Town Manager', pp. 35–6.
[46] Arthur Schopenhauer, 'On the Suffering of the World' in *On the Suffering of the World,* taken from Penguin Classics edition of *Essays and Aphorisms* (1970 [1850])*,* trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 2004 [1850]), p. 4.
[47] Ligotti qtd. in Matt Cardin, '"It's all a matter of personal pathology": An Interview with Thomas Ligotti', *The New York Review of Science Fiction,* 28:19 (2006) in *Born to Fear: Interviews with Thomas Ligotti,* ed. by Matt Cardin (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2014)*,* 117–133 (p. 119).

of consciousness that leads to the contemplation of self-destruction (both in the physical and metaphysical sense) as a means of alleviating existential discontent.

While I will look at the two tales, 'The Clown Puppet' and 'My Case for Retributive Action' in this section, it is in *The Conspiracy against the Human Race* where the author's philosophical underpinnings on existential pain are most explicitly examined. The text begins with a lengthy critical tirade against optimistic philosophy and draws attention to the likes of Wessel Zapffe, Thomas Metzinger and Arthur Schopenhauer, whose thought represents (for the author at least) a logical break from the existential philosophical mainstream. Described as 'stunning indictments of our many pretentions to being human', here Ligotti expands on the pessimistic thought of these influential writers through a lengthy consideration of life as what he sees as a mendacious puppet show and a conspiracy against our cognisant species.[48] Here, Ligotti argues that there is a fundamental horror to existence and that our cognisant awareness of our own suffering and finitude is parent of our subsequent existential discord. As a result of our consciousness, 'we are susceptible to thoughts that were starting and dreadful to us, thoughts that have never been equitable by those that are collected and reassuring'.[49] Throughout *Conspiracy,* we can read Ligotti as a pataphysician of this perceived conspiracy and as an author at great pains to disturb his reader with ontologically disruptive theories pertaining to the failure of philosophy to accurately capture and respond satisfactorily to existential trauma and angst.[50]

Ligotti's philosophy is inextricable from his fiction and although *Conspiracy* was first published in entirety in 2010, it is the culmination of at least two decades' engagement in the area of supernatural horror and its biomorphic relationship to pessimistic philosophy.[51] This is evident as whole passages are lifted from 'Professor Nobody's Little Lectures on Supernatural Horror', where ontological boundaries which Ligotti's fiction seeks to transgress are emphasised:

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[48] Thacker, *Tentacles Longer than Night*, p. 160.

[49] Ligotti, *Conspiracy,* p. 27

[50] Pataphysics is a branch of philosophy that examines imaginary phenomena, popularized by the French writer Alfred Jarry at the turn of the twentieth century. In this case, I am referring to Ligotti as a pataphysician as he examines and studies supernatural horror as a realism in itself.

[51] *Conspiracy* was first published on *Thomas Ligotti Online* in 2006 but was greatly expanded for the 2010 version. In 2018 it was republished by Penguin with a new introduction. See Michael Göttert and Thomas Ligotti, 'Interview with Thomas Ligotti', *Thomas Ligotti Online* (2010) <http://www.ligotti.net/showthread.php?t=4180> [accessed 28 February 2019].

> Supernatural horror was one of the ways we found that would allow us to
> live with our double selves. By its employ, we discovered how to take all
> the things that victimize us in our natural lives and turn them into the very
> stuff of demonic delight in our fantasy lives. In story and song, we could
> entertain ourselves with the worst we could think of, overwriting real pains
> with ones that were unreal and harmless to our species.[52]

For Professor Nobody, the human subject is often overawed by a mendacious conspiracy in which they suffer jointly as a precondition of their physically decaying and mentally insecure state of being (as sentient, organic bodies) within the world and through some form or another of excessive and pointless labour that keeps the nefarious wheels of society going. In this sense, the human being, clearly, is no beneficiary in this world and that existence itself is not the 'gift' it is made out to be.[53] In a similar diatribe against the apologists for existence, Arthur Schopenhauer argues that life 'presents itself by no means as a gift to be enjoyed, but as a task, a drudgery, to be worked through' and as I will now demonstrate, parallels with this line of thought run throughout the texts 'The Clown Puppet' and 'My Case for Retributive Action'.[54]

Early on in 'The Clown Puppet', we are presented with a despairing narrator who is troubled by his own mentally unstable condition and who is equally troubled by a perceived acute awareness of the pernicious fluxes and the malignancy of the world he lives in:

> It has always seemed to me that my existence consisted purely and
> exclusively of nothing but the most outrageous nonsense. As long as I
> can remember, every incident and every impulse of my existence has
> served only to perpetuate one episode after another of conspicuous
> nonsense, each completely outrageous in its nonsensicality.[55]

Life, for the narrator, 'seemed to be nothing more than some freak accident occurring at a painfully show rate of speed'.[56] The narrator spends his waking hours (usually the evenings and nights) working through life, employed in a back-street pharmaceuticals dispensary. Here, prompted by the luminous and flashing neon signage from the butcher's shop opposite, he finds himself excessively contemplating what he terms

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[52] Thomas Ligotti, 'Professor Nobody's Little Lectures on Supernatural Horror', [1985] in *Songs of a Dead Dreamer and Grimscribe* (London: Penguin, 2015 [1989 & 1991]), pp. 185–6, Qtd. in Ligotti, *Conspiracy*, pp. 93–4.

[53] Ligotti is vociferous in this belief, stating his belief 'that existence is by its nature evil. And nothing is good.' Ligotti qtd. in Dziemianowicz, 'Interview with Thomas Ligotti', p. 36.

[54] Arthur Schopenhauer. *The World as Will and Representation. Vol. II,* trans. by E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1966 [1844]), p. 357.

[55] Thomas Ligotti, 'The Clown Puppet' [1996], in *Teatro Grottesco* (London: Virgin Books, 2008), p. 53.

[56] Ligotti, 'The Clown Puppet', p. 53.

'meat nonsense', or the contemplation of existence as a flesh-and-blood being. When overwhelmed by this he turns his attentions to what he describes as 'death nonsense', which is an interest seemingly cultivated by his proximity and access to the litany of fatal medicines at his disposal. Thus, the narrator is fundamentally preoccupied with the very same questions that have concerned many existential thinkers throughout history, namely, what is the point of life and why should one not just kill oneself and be done with it?

The allusions towards a concern with philosophical existentialism are characteristic traits of Ligotti's oeuvre. Throughout *Teatro Grottesco* Ligotti's protagonists exhibit a concern with, and desire to, better understand existence, even though their own unconventional understandings often dislodge fundamental ontological preconceptions that the reader might have. As far as Ligotti is concerned, the works of Sartre or Camus, for example, while 'filled with marvellous expressions of disgust with existence and a tortured preoccupation with articulating this disgust', lose much of their radical power in their rather formulaic desire to 'reach the conclusion that "well, after all, being alive isn't so awful"'.[57] Unlike the twentieth-century French Existentialists, who proclaimed life was an absurdity but we must, nonetheless, remain positive towards it, events in 'The Clown Puppet' dispute this. As the narrator considers 'meat' nonsense and 'death nonsense', he contends that his life, haunted as it is by his occurrences and encounters with the nefarious Clown Puppet, is fundamentally absurd and there can be no valid positivist attitude assumed that obscures or relegates the pain and suffering inherent to (his) existence. Levinas' notion of nausea is here applicable in the sense that existence, for the narrator of 'The Clown Puppet' is felt as a sensation of suffering from the very inside of his being. In one instance, the narrator berates his ridiculous and terrifying tormentor, the manifestation of his existential despair: 'I'm sick of this contemptible and disgusting nonsense', the narrator shouts, before recognising the futility of such protestations against what is, in effect, the very outrageousness of existence. As Levinas articulates, there is in nausea an eschatological aspect, 'a refusal to remain there, an effort to get out' that affects the subject, 'yet this effort is always already characterized as desperate'.[58] The result of which is a feeling of hopelessness at the 'impossibility of

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[57] Ligotti qtd. in David Ableev, 'Interview with Thomas Ligotti' (2009) in *Born to Fear: Interviews with Thomas Ligotti,* ed. by Matt Cardin (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2014)*,* 155–74 (pp. 170–1).
[58] Levinas, *On Escape,* p. 66.

being what one is', and an existential despair at being tied to an existence that manifests itself as the suffering and revulsion inherent in us.[59] Experiencing precisely this existential deadlock, the narrator resignedly continues to go through the motions, as it were. Riveted to existence, he chooses 'to play [his] part along with the clown puppet', that is, to meander through his despair and revulsion, in the Schopenhauerian sense, despite a faint understanding that it will not end well.[60]

As 'The Clown Puppet' attests, human beings such as the narrator and the unfortunate Mr Vizniak are tragic figures inhabiting nightmare scenarios and directed by forces beyond their control. But the tragedy is not the grim ends they inevitably face, but the predicament of their very being.[61] Ligotti's protagonists do not seek affirmation, but want to be relieved of their consciousness and often through this process become privy to a 'special fate' that is presently beyond them.[62] This is alluded to by the narrator's rather melancholy conceit as he considers the disappearance of Vizniak: '*Now he would see* […] *what controlled the strings of the clown puppet*'.[63] The scene of Vizniak's disappearing is also significant because it demonstrates to the narrator that, while he 'nonetheless always had the haunting sense of being singled out in some way from all others', the experience of despair is in fact a more widespread condition of ontological uncertainty, one which the narrator has even less of an understanding of than he had previously believed.[64] Again, this is a nod towards Schopenhauer, who argued that 'each individual misfortune, to be sure seems an exceptional occurrence; but misfortune in general is the rule'.[65] What Ligotti's narrator learns here, is that he is not special, nor unique in his frequent disturbances, and that his experience of these absurd (real and/or imagined) apparitions are not only his fate, but the fate of countless others.

An alternative reading of this story is also possible. We can read the narrator as a troubled, pathologically unstable and even tragic anti-hero. Here, the narrator's uncanny meetings with the Clown Puppet would be but '*mentally deranged epileptic*'

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[59] Levinas, *On Escape,* p. 66.
[60] Ligotti, 'The Clown Puppet', pp. 58–9.
[61] David Benatar refers to the 'Human Predicament' as being caught in an existential deadlock between a meaningless existence, filled with suffering and pain, and death – the *horror vacui* – that resolves little and who's cost is grave indeed.
[62] Ligotti, 'The Clown Puppet'*,* p. 63.
[63] Ligotti, 'The Clown Puppet', p. 64. Italics in original.
[64] Ligotti, 'The Clown Puppet', p. 63.
[65] Schopenhauer, 'On the suffering of the World', p. 3.

episodes in which he becomes attuned to the absurdity of existence and in response acts in ways that are contrary to the acceptable.[66] If this is the case, when the Clown Puppet visits and presents the narrator with his employer's old passport, it is not unimaginable that the character is compensating or seeking to obfuscate his own transgressions and his probable theft of the token item from his employer's living quarters upstairs (a possibility hinted at when Vizniak tells of hearing an intruder that evening).[67] Neither is it a stretch to imagine that, rather than the Clown Puppet being an entirely separate entity, the figure is the entirely imagined manifestation or uncanny reflection of his own innate absurdity, evil and perversity. That rather than it being a supernatural figure that makes Vizniak disappear, it is conceivable that the narrator (in the midst of another psychotic episode) kills the old man himself. The reasons for this are unclear, but in an utterly meaningless and absurd situation, when limits are no longer discernible, no justifiably good reason is needed. Indeed, by this stage the narrator has himself admitted that he is both unstable and that the red mist (or, more accurately, the 'reddish-gold haze') has affected him.[68] Such a reading is entirely speculative, but it does add further gravitas to a potentially transgressive reading of Ligotti, playing up the violent delinquency on show. If we deem the alternative reading of 'The Clown Puppet' accurate, then transgressive actions here demonstrably operate on a scale ranging from the downright sadistic to the utterly meaningless as a partial distraction from an otherwise malevolent and painful existence, rather than as an act of affirmation. This state of affairs is explored in 'My Case for Retributive Action'.

'My Case' begins with the narrator recalling his strange experiences since turning up for work in a storefront office in a strange and distant town. Predictably, for a Ligotti story, work is tedious to the extreme (processing forms unspecified for the Quine Organization), the hours irregular to the point of being indefinite and the town itself operates as part of a shadowy and underhand conspiracy. Perturbed by his new surroundings, the narrator begins to suspect he is the unwitting victim of a nefarious game or experiment and seeks retributive action against those he blames for his plight (namely his doctors) before making his *escape*. Throughout the narrative, it becomes clear that consciousness is a highly unstable and distressing experience, one that

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[66] Ligotti, 'the Clown Puppet', p. 53.
[67] Ligotti, 'The Clown Puppet', pp. 61–2.
[68] Ligotti, 'The Clown Puppet', p. 57.

registers as 'passive terror approaching absolute panic'.[69] As part of his 'therapy' for his perennial agitations, his former doctor ordered him onto a train and across the border towards the far-away town despite knowing of his long-standing fear and dread of straying too far from home.[70] Unsettled by his journey, the narrator recalls how he:

> [H]ad no location in the universe, nothing to grasp for that minimum of security which every creature needs merely to exist without suffering from the sensation that everything is spinning even faster on a cosmic carousel with only endless blackness at the edge.[71]

Along this fear-inducing journey, the narrator traumatically concludes that life itself is an inherent cycle of undue suffering and helps to reinforce his understanding of life as imbued with perpetual suffering and the instability wrought by the acuteness of consciousness. The result of which is the fastidious belief that life 'by its very nature is unendurable'.[72]

The character in this text who seems to have suffered and endured the most, however, is not the narrator, but his predecessor, Hatcher. After a vehement and impassioned refusal to work and to conform as the Quine Organization demands of him, Hatcher is inauspiciously thrown out of the office. What happens subsequently are a series of actions designed to further exacerbate and sadistically play up his anxieties and pains:

> Everything was set up to make him a guinea pig […]. They went to a great deal of trouble. Hatcher was being cleansed for what the old woman, along with the company's chemical engineers, intended to put into him.[73]

After this series of torments Hatcher becomes victim to chemical experimentation that leads to his transformation into a grotesque creature (the pitifully named 'nobby monster'), a state he must endure for what remains of his contemptable existence. When the narrator discovers Hatcher in this deplorable state, murder becomes an act of compassion, or rather the narrator's intervention is simply to assist Hatcher in a suicide that he is not physically able to enact himself.[74] Whilst considered an act of mercy borne out of the narrator not being able to 'imagine that Hatcher desired to

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[69] Thomas Ligotti, 'My Case for Retributive Action' [2001], in *Teatro Grottesco* (London: Virgin Books, 2008), p. 88.
[70] Ligotti, 'My Case for Retributive Action', p. 87.
[71] Ligotti, 'My Case for Retributive Action', p. 88.
[72] Ligotti, 'My Case for Retributive Action', p. 88.
[73] Ligotti, 'My Case for Retributive Action', p. 95.
[74] Ligotti, 'My Case for Retributive Action', p. 97.

continue his existence in that state', his subsequent actions are not quite as well-intentioned.[75] The narrator takes pleasure in torturing his doctor, who he has transformed into a similar spider-creature using the venom taken from Hatcher's corpse. He then sends a vial of the venom to his associate so that s/he may use it against their doctor as they see fit.

The violence and transgressive intent here is arguably Sadean in that it serves no particular purpose other than to satisfy the perverse whims of the offender in a meaningless world. Whether retributive or not, this action is acknowledged for what it is: hollow expenditure that offers minimal respite from the unendurable suffering of life. Indeed, in the final passage of the narrative, the narrator makes apparent his intention, once his sadistic whims have been satisfied, to take his own life and put an end to his suffering. By this point, the narrator has come to view this suffering as an absurd plot, the meaning of which is beyond him. Presented with no solution, other than the end of life which comes as a reprieve for the narrator, there is notably none of the affirmation that would suggest a potential suicide is an optimistic gesture. Instead, his attraction to fatal self-destruction as an eschatological method is the culmination of his exhaustion and frustration at the predicament of his life, and indeed, life more generally. Escape, as Levinas attests, 'is the need to get out of oneself, that is, *to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I is oneself*'.[76] As this chapter continues I will examine the extent to which death and self-destruction present a means of getting out of oneself. Life, as we have seen, is characterised by the dreadful and inescapable feeling of nausea that blights the subject and is easily recognised within the discourse of those characters previously eluded to. Furthermore, the disorientating experience of life reflects an existential sickness or unease which Ligotti further explores through his representation of characters experiencing reality and ontologically-challenging situations (be it through the experience of horror, or in their nauseating recognition of their own indeterminate and liminal state of being).

Thomas Ligotti's pessimism and outlook on life, as is described in *Conspiracy* and in the two texts mentioned above, puts him at vehement odds with those who occlude the tragic and horrific aspects of reality through a steadfast belief in

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[75] Ligotti, 'My Case for Retributive Action', p. 97.
[76] Levinas, *On Escape,* p. 55.

affirmation, or a belief that life *is* worth the trouble.[77] Things do not tend towards positive resolutions, but instead seem to convalesce the way of the negative – particularly in the thought of death as some sort of reprieve. For Schopenhauer, the very principle that the human should exist, or that there is meaning or value inherent in existence – the very tenets of modern empirical, humanist philosophy – is a groundless one. In the pages thus far, and in the texts discussed, it is fair assessment to conclude that these utterly transgressive sentiments are developed and pushed to the point of terminal fracture in the fiction of Thomas Ligotti.

Further indication of this is the repeated assertion that human beings themselves occupy an indeterminate, liminal and transgressive state of being. They are aware, but also unaware; present, but also absent; living, but in the process of dying. This is exemplified in their presentation as marionettes, clowns, fools, puppets, etc. In 'Dream of a Manikin', for example, the narrator (a psychiatrist believing himself to be acting out his own sadistic games on patients) comes to realise that he cannot with any certainty even claim to be himself – either physically or of mind – nor in control of his thoughts and actions. A realisation that he becomes apoplectic towards. In his words:

> I, for one, know I'm not a dream. I am real, Dr. –. (There, how do you like being an anonymity without foundation in this or any other universe?) So please be so kind as to acknowledge this reality of my existence.[78]

Similarly, Ligotti's work often situates his characters in somewhat liminal, carnivalesque or 'sideshow' and 'border' places to provoke a similar effect of subjective dread and terror.[79] The *sideshow*, particularly, literalizes the underlying, abstract and horrific angst that is central to his work and acts as a metaphor for human's liminal or grotesque state of existence. In what follows, I highlight how the human subject lacks any fundamental sense of control, agency or, indeed, any coherent understanding of the realities of the carnivalesque, nightmare world(s) they inhabit in Ligotti's short

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[77] It is a running retort throughout 'My Case for Retributive Action' that some things are, contrary to the mantra of the malicious doctors, unendurable. As it turns out, life itself is *the* most unendurable of activities.

[78] Thomas Ligotti, 'Dream of a Manikin', [1985] in *Songs of a Dead Dreamer and Grimscribe* (London: Penguin, 2016 [1989 & 1991]), p. 58.

[79] That is, in places that are either ulterior to convention and in places caught between reality, in the unapproachable, cosmic sense and the reality-for-us, or the more typically recognizable world. Titles such as, 'Gas Station Carnivals' [1996], 'Sideshow, and Other Stories' [2003], 'In a Foreign Land, in a Foreign Town' [1997], or in settings described not by name, but by their proximity to some indeterminate border, seem to confirm this

fiction. But first a noteworthy distinction as to the strange kind of liminality deployed in his work here must be qualified.

In their benchmark study, Stallybrass and White consider the carnivalesque as representative of a 'symbolic inversion' that 'inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms'.[80] Transgression thus becomes a 'movement into an absolutely negative space'.[81] They argue that the grotesque is a product of binary extremism that reveals and upsets underlying structural features and codes of acceptability.[82] The carnivalesque is at once the facilitation of an affirmationist transformation and also a 'demystificatory instrument' that (through its excess) makes apparent and known the previously unseen, grotesque and horrific.[83] If a transgression relies on a going beyond the acceptable (a desire or will towards the unknown or unacceptable), then the obvious retort to the carnival as a transgressive action is to suggest that, by demystifying the grotesque, it is in fact operating in the service and aid of hegemony or power itself. The traditional carnivalesque world represents the world-turned-upside-down; where all values are somehow subverted; the fool becomes king and the privileged wallow in the filth. The values that are constitutive of a fully-functioning, apparently rational society are subverted – transgressed – but for a limited time and within a clearly pre-defined framework of behaviour (or delinquency). Ligotti's twisted variation of the carnivalesque foregoes the vertical movement we have grown accustomed to in transgressive fiction in favour of a more lateral and altogether more disturbing movement towards the *sideshow*.[84] Here, values are not subverted but negated, the laws of reality are not subject to a playful spectacle, but instead ontologically-given paradigms and dichotomies are irredeemably skewed. The conventional, hegemonic hierarchy still exists in Ligotti – see, for example, 'The Town Manager' – but the evil, excessive and unbearably sadistic ways in which this hierarchy functions now takes place in wholly spectral, supernatural and unconventional ways far removed from that of the carnivalesque (and indeed also from other realist forms of narrative). Moreover, whereas the carnivalesque generally corresponds to a spectacle of some sort that will

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[80] Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, pp. 17–18.
[81] Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression,* pp. 17–18.
[82] Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 26.
[83] Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, pp. 18–9.
[84] Recall, here for example, stories, such as 'Gas Station Carnivals', 'The Last Feast of Harlequin', 'The Sect of the Idiot'.

be returned to normal, there is no escape or return from Ligotti's *sideshow*, which envelops the entire gamut of existence in a shroud of despair

In a passing remark, Ligotti cites his appreciation of Edgar Allan Poe for the way that

> [He] created a world that is wholly evil, desolate and doomed. […] And there is no escape from this world, only a fall into it. […] His characters do not take us from place to place looking at the scenery. They are inside a world that has no outside – no well-mapped places from which one can come and none to which one can go.[85]

The very same sentiment can be repeated and applied to Ligotti's fictional, *sideshow* worlds. Within these alternative/transgressive narratives, all the excesses of exaltation that are conventionally assured within a carnivalesque world are replaced by a crossing of or going beyond the very limits of consciousness and life itself which affirms the contention that the enduring subject would be better off if relieved of existence entirely. Ultimately, carnivalesque transgression aims to re-establish meaning, value or order in the world opposed to that of a hegemonic power or established codes or norms of behaviour. The *sideshow,* however, aims toward the total obfuscation or abnegation of these completely. It offers a glimpse towards another kind of order, one that relegates the human – victim of cognisant existence – rather than affirm it.

In the aptly titled 'Sideshow, and Other Stories', the narrator recalls his relationship with his elusive 'coffeeshop companion' and his strange and sudden disappearance.[86] As he considers the missing man's left-behind notepads, what is most curious for the narrator is his peculiar reference to the world he lives in through the very specific terms 'sideshow' and 'show business'. The elusive companion claims that his:

> [C]entre of interest […] has always been the wretched show business of [his] own life […] like a series of sideshows, senseless episodes without continuity or coherence […]. By necessity we live in a world, a sideshow world, where everything is ultimately peculiar and ultimately ridiculous.[87]

By these terms, the role of the wretched human beings who inhabit these sideshow worlds are those of actors – beings who (like those within the Bakhtinian carnivalesque

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[85] Ligotti, *Conspiracy,* p. 191.
[86] Thomas Ligotti, 'Sideshow, and Other Stories' [2003], in *Teatro Grottesco* (London: Virgin Books, 2008), p. 51.
[87] Ligotti, 'Sideshow, and Other Stories', p. 39.

worlds) perform their often incendiary, taboo-laden and grotesque transgressions for amusement and spectacle. Yet, thinking of them as actors suggests a sense of complicity that is inaccurate. Instead, it is more accurate to think of Ligotti's wretched human beings as unwitting puppets, tied to this reality by the strings of their own ontological presumptions, as well as by more shadowy and undiscernible forces behind the veil of reality. The coffeeshop companion alludes to this, explaining that, while he occupies and invests himself in various activities, he does this not for any sense of gratification, nor for escapism, but because he is compelled to do so. Here, every self-defining artifice is simply 'another action I perform *on cue*'.[88]

In Ligotti's fiction the drama (or more accurately, the horror) tends to occur from the point of a negation or an excess of conventional comprehension, that is, the point at which a narrator recognises an unaccountable/unresolvable excess *in*, or *beyond* the world they take as a given. This traumatic and paradigm-shifting excess leads to their self-destructive transgression of the norms of behaviour/thinking, or a literal negation of themselves *into* this strange, supernatural world. We have already seen this in effect in 'The Clown Puppet'. Here, as the ridiculous apparition cannot be assuaged, the narrator is beset by what can only be described as existential resignation. In 'Sideshow, and Other Stories', the narrator is introduced to a similar possibility of an eerie and alternative world in which all existential activity is either mere show at the behest of an unassailable conspiratorial force, or else unwilling compulsion.

Of these notably weird writings, four stories are left, including 'The Malignant Matrix' and 'Premature Communication'. 'The Malignant Matrix' describes how a man is invited to witness a 'breakthrough […] concerning nothing less than the discovery of the true origins of all existential phenomena, both physical and metaphysical – the very source […] of existence in the broadest possible sense'.[89] In 'Premature Communication' a child believes to have become 'assimilated' into the 'great and ancient machinery which powered […] the most infinitesimal movements of the world'.[90] The apparent weirdness that is constitutive of the sideshow world is of

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[88] Ligotti, 'Sideshow, and Other Stories', pp. 38–9.
[89] Ligotti, 'Sideshow, and Other Stories', p. 40.
[90] Ligotti, 'Sideshow, and Other Stories', pp. 43–4.

particular importance in all of these stories, and corresponds with a specific, masochistic kind of weirdness described my Mark Fisher. For Fisher:

> [T]he concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolete. If the encounter with the strange here is not straightforwardly pleasurable, it is not simply unpleasant either: there is an enjoyment in seeing the familiar and the conventional becoming outmoded – an enjoyment which [mixes] pleasure and pain [91]

In 'Sideshow', the coffeeshop companion's left-behind writings refer to precisely this form of alterity or some other world that dissects and ultimately negates the *ordinary* world. As it becomes apparent that there is more going on in the world than we are privy to, the narrator's capacity to reason against this intrusion of the supernatural ultimately fails. He recalls, for example, that he once attempted to challenge the writer's contention that 'everything (in a 'sideshow world,' that is) was ultimately peculiar and ultimately ridiculous', and that '[t]hese qualities – the peculiar and the ridiculous – are imminent and absolute in all existence and would be in any conceivable existent order…'.[92] However, his attempts to disqualify the writer's assertion fail as by the end of the narrative, the narrator, now more familiar and attuned to the pessimistic outlook and inherent ridiculousness of a world he is by his very nature a puppet to, begins to show signs of a macabre appreciation for it.[93]

In this peculiar sideshow world, ontological frameworks which he had previously employed have been discarded and the narrator thus sees himself as the subject of forces he cannot comprehend and resignedly accepts his part in this affair. '[T]his was indeed a sideshow town in every way, peculiar and ridiculous in its essence, though no more so than any other place', he concludes.[94] Resignation, however, seems to have its limits too, and in the end not everyone can tolerate living with such ontologically unsettling aspersions. Ultimately the sideshow of existence seems incompatible with continued existence and the narrator alludes that such a realisation had played into the ominous disappearance of his coffeeshop companion. 'In the end', he posits:

> [I]t seemed that he could not attain even an attitude of resignation, let alone the strength to let himself be carried along by the immanent and

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[91] Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater, 2016), p. 13.
[92] Ligotti, 'Sideshow, and Other Stories', p. 51.
[93] Ligotti, 'Sideshow, and Other Stories', p. 51.
[94] Ligotti, 'Sideshow, and Other Stories', p. 51.

> absolute realities, the great inescapable matters which he had been privileged to glimpse.[95]

If 'Sideshow, and Other Stories' introduces the reader to speculative lateral negation of the carnivalesque, a 'sideshow' world adjacent to and incompatible with our own, then 'The Town Manager' and 'Our Temporary Supervisor' expose this transgressive continuum as uncannily inherent to the (marginally) more conventional or recognisable workplace setting. In these two narratives, the workplace is quite literally subject to and the product of transgressive excesses and mendacious derangement studied above. Yet, in these other fictions is aligned with transgression and exploitation. In them, negativity and destruction are acquiescent to the eerie and pernicious forces and demands of capitalism. While clearly indicative of the author's critique of capitalism as a nihilistic and fatalistic enterprise, on a wider scale the engagement with capital is deeply aligned with larger questions of agency and existential value. This principle is evident in the motif of the self-destructive and pessimistic alienated worker and, of course, in the eerie and nefarious corporate machinations at work in some of Ligotti's later stories. Indeed, Mark Fisher argued that 'Capital is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity'.[96] A reading of the eerie persistence of capital's influence in Ligotti's texts is crucial, as it allows the author and the reader to confront the 'broader question of the agency of the immaterial and the inanimate […] and the way that "we" "ourselves" are caught up in the rhythms, pulsions and patternings of non-human forces' from which there is no escape.[97] Beginning with *My Work is Not Yet Done,* in the next section I explore how Ligotti's workplace narratives literalise the pernicious conspiracy that we have thus far examined, and how the deplorable experiences within these settings simultaneously feed into Ligotti's most pessimistic sentiments regarding the (im)possibility of escape or subjective negation of the wider horror of the world.

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[95] Ligotti, 'Sideshow, and Other Stories', pp. 51–2.
[96] Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, p. 11.
[97] Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, pp. 11–2.

Strategies of Escape in Thomas Ligotti's Workplace Horror

As with the texts explored in the previous chapters, it is again the workplace – the spaces where labour and human excessive expenditure is spent in increasingly nihilistic ways – that aggravates pessimistic and transgressive fantasies leading to self-destruction. In this final section, I examine how, in Thomas Ligotti's workplace horror fiction, the systemic problems of neoliberal economic and social organisation reflect and mirror his wider view of humanity and the world. Following this, I explore the strategies of negation as they appear in these fictions, particularly through his philosophical examination of suicide. For Ligotti, horror is at its best when it portrays our worst nightmares, 'and then [..] leave[s] it at that – no happy endings, no apologias, no excuses, no redemption, no escape'.[98] These are precisely the qualities in evidence throughout his workplace horrors, and I would argue – particularly in the resounding lack of escape and/or redemption – that they are demonstrative of a selection of writings that offer self-destruction not as a means to an ends, but as the culmination of his pessimistic philosophy. Here, I focus particularly on how characters engage with death, decay and destruction and the extent to which their actions translate Ligotti's ideas into a viable or speculative negation of a depressive contemporary present.

Consistent with other authors studied in this thesis so far, Ligotti does not present any kind of viable or realistic political alternative in his fiction. However, unlike the often-satirical Ellis, Palahniuk and Ballard, Ligotti rarely tempts the subject of political critique, revolution or dissent. The corporate and workplace entities are rarely the direct target but a contrivance intended to impart a nominal and increasingly debased sense of familiarity. Since the publication of the explicitly 'corporate' horror fiction in the volume *My Work is Not Yet Done* (2002), Ligotti has been vocal in interviews that the workplace settings are less a coherent political statement against globalised neoliberalism (although he is a vocal critic of capitalism too), and more a means to better describe the larger and endemic human capacity for greed, excess and destruction. For Ligotti, the grim representations of materialist and workplace conditions facilitate the encounter with the eerie and the nihilism inherent in the world, rather than impart some practical critique of common workplace practices or structures.

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[98] Ligotti qtd. in Ayad, 'Literature is Entertainment', p. 96.

While the eerie, for Fisher, remained the 'release from the mundane', an 'escape from the confines of what is ordinarily taken for reality', Ligotti's workplace fictions provide no hope of conventional escape.[99] The workplace horror stories take the view that the individual (and individual death, as will be later examined) does not make a difference to the system which pushes on, unperturbed by the transgressions of a subject of a loss that it perversely and nihilistically wills. Instead, they propose a pessimistic, existentialist approach to facing up to the misery of the mundane that correlates with a pragmatic assessment of the worth (and/or necessity) of continued existence. The stories contained in *My Work* are some of the most concerted efforts in contemporary horror to recreate and capture the mood of dreadful anguish experienced by the (human) subject caught within the dominating and degenerative corporate and apparatus within contemporary society. Framed through the pessimism, transgression and the themes of existential tragedy, readings of these texts explore the rejection of any positive outcome that might be speculatively found in nihilism. In so doing, he takes an approach to negativity that is compliant with Benjamin Noys' assertion that 'only through the reconfiguration of negativity as a practice […] can we develop more supple and precise forms of resistance and struggle within and against capitalism'.[100]

Throughout his workplace horrors, Thomas Ligotti undermines any lingering faith towards the living nightmare of the contemporary world. Ligotti's workplace fictions go beyond transgression in their fatalistic attempt to show – in all of its exquisite bleakness – the extent of the disintegration experienced by the subject and human society, in an ultimately chimerical, meaningless and sadistic world. As Ligotti's stories thus take the transgressive mode into even more self-reflective, self-destructive and pessimistic territory, it is crucial that we rescue a subversive 'value' in pessimism and in transgressive acts/fantasies of discordance provoked by the author's pessimistic-realist outlook on life. Darrell Schweitzer refers to Thomas Ligotti's 'Corporate Horror' as tales which reflect the terrifying and 'dehumanizing effects of large cubicle-filled offices where vast numbers of anonymous, white collar drones waste their lives'.[101] I develop the concept further, referring to Ligotti's 'workplace horrors' as eerie and pessimistic fictions that are demonstrative of a 'shadowy and incomprehensible'

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[99] Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie,* p. 13.
[100] Noys, *Persistence of the Negative*, pp. xi–xii
[101] Schweitzer, 'Thomas Ligotti's Corporate Horror', p. 127.

aspect of existence that co-opts and correlates the capitalist apparatus, leading to the complete ruination and undoing of the subject (individual).[102] For Fisher, the eerie designates a perspective that 'can give us access to the forces which govern mundane reality but which are ordinarily obscured, just as it can give us access to spaces beyond mundane reality altogether'.[103] To read Ligotti's workplaces and workplace horrors as eerie entities is to look beyond the conventional hierarchies of power and control evident here, and to speculate on the even-more inherent and malign conditions that make existence such a thoroughgoingly baseless and sadistic affair.

In the workplace horrors, the author reimagines the machinations of the workplace with his typical verve for nihilism and pessimism in order to demonstrate both the insidious power its holds and, at the same time, the meaninglessness of it all. In the corruption and the alienation of the worker, throughout *My Work is Not Yet Done*, Ligotti describes the increasingly disconsolate and desolate world as the apex of the capitalist/corporate compulsion towards ever more frightening methods of profiteering, control and destruction. *My Work is Not Yet Done* (the novella, rather than the collection of the same title) is Ligotti's most sustained critique of the workplace. Following a restructure and a series of strange incidents leading to his being fired, Frank Dominio seeks vengeance against those within the company who he perceives to have conspired against him.[104] However, in the process Dominio becomes possessed by a dark force that provides him with supernatural powers that enable his increasingly violent, retributive acts.

The other two narratives of the collection interrogate the relationship between a monstrously other and destructive force that is manifest within the recognisable workplace or corporate institution. 'I Have A Special Plan for This World', follows an unnamed protagonist within yet another strange and ambitious corporate company based within the ominously named 'Murder City'.[105] The company itself are specialists in the amendment of documents and uncanny links can here be made with the practices of the Quine Organisation encountered in 'My Case for Retributive Action'.

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102 Thomas Ligotti, 'The Nightmare Network' [1996], in *My Work is Not Yet Done* (London: Virgin Books, 2002), p. 173.
103 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie,* p. 13.
104 Thomas Ligotti, 'My Work is Not Yet Done' [2002], in *My Work is Not Yet Done* (London: Virgin Books, 2002). For the sake of brevity will be henceforth referred to as 'My Work' (non-italicised).
105 Thomas Ligotti, 'I Have a Special Plan for This World' [2000], in *My Work is Not Yet Done* (London: Virgin Books, 2002): For the sake of brevity will be henceforth referred to as 'Special Plan'.

While little else is discerned about the mechanics of their mode of business, it is revealed that the company is driven by a toxic desire to become a global powerhouse and a 'dominant presence in the world marketplace'.[106] This poisonous aspiration spills outwards, expunging itself into the surrounding urban spaces in the form of a growing, living, thick and yellowish haze. This phenomenon coincides with the accelerating social and environmental degeneration of the surrounding area and the increasing rate at which supervisors and former employees are being found dead within the city.[107]

The final narrative, 'The Nightmare Network', is an utterly bleak fantasy that presents a 'steadily deteriorating' vision of a future in which the enterprise takes on 'a life of its own'.[108] In a series of fragments, the reader pieces together the cumulative advancement, acceleration and deterioration of two opposing, globalised (even cosmic) organisations, compulsively driven to self-destructive implosion. These fragments describe the corporate merger between the Nightmare Network, and its hyper-capitalist competitor, the Oneiric Corporation – one specialising in the manufacture and dissemination of dreams, the other of nightmares – and the subsequent acceleration of their activities resulting in greater levels of destruction and (dis)continuity. Most disturbingly, throughout the piecemeal narrative, human beings are tortured, exploited and relegated *ad negativum,* as the corporations contort and extend, driven by their own inherent malevolence and seemingly, by an obfuscated supernatural authority or presence. As alluded to in the above, each of these workplace narratives raise tough questions about the mutually destructive relationship between the nihilistic world of work and the entrapped puppet-like human subject(s). As such, it is a literary exposition of discordant fantasies of self-destruction as relief from a terrifying post-industrial culture that preys upon the insecurities and the inherent pain of its workers.

For Nietzsche, nihilism is caused by a cynical dissonance with predominant religious belief – the death of God – but nowadays nihilism is often the response to a disconnect between 'fictitious' capital and labour, between the efforts – the suffering and alienation – of the workforce and its immaterial, chimerical product. This is identified by Georges Bataille, who, in *The Accursed Share*, argues that 'beyond our

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[106] Ligotti, 'Special Plan', p. 152.
[107] Ligotti, 'Special Plan', p. 145.
[108] Ligotti, 'The Nightmare Network', pp. 183; 171.

immediate ends, man's activity [work; labour] in fact pursues the useless and infinite fulfilment of the universe'.[109] For Ligotti, nihilism in his corporate horrors designates the acceptance of meaningless and subsequent (philosophical) embrace of catastrophic destruction and death as key to a pragmatic response to the inherent suffering of humankind within the world. While Ligotti, for the most part of his career fought the nihilistic label, in recent years his opinions have taken a different tone. In recent interviews he has accepted the term as some way accurate of his outlook, 'because what people usually mean by this world is someone who is anti-life, and that definition fits me just fine, at least in principle'.[110] For him, nihilism begins with the world being revealed as inherently meaningless and purposeless, thus '[he] write[s] fiction from the perspective of moral and metaphysical nihilism' that is symptomatic of the traumatic existential rift between subject and the modern world in which they exist.[111]

Like the author himself, Ligotti's protagonists in his workplace horrors see no meaningful purpose or value in their efforts, nor do they have any viable or meaningful outlet – they cannot find affirmative actions or develop in any positivist sense and so resort to acts of retributive, meaningless and nihilistic transgression. In these narratives, the machinations of modernity have objectified the human subjects to the extent they are devoid of anything purposeful or affirmative. A response to this (philosophically speaking) is suggested by Eugene Thacker who, citing the Japanese philosopher, Keiji Nishitani, argues that we should not be enticed towards affirmation and the reinvestment of meaning, nor wallow 'in despair at this loss of meaning, this "abyss of nihility"'.[112] Instead, the response – as so clearly demonstrated within Ligotti's fiction, as will see throughout the remainder of this section – should be through a self-destructive, negating descent *through* nihilism.

The critique of capital in Ligotti is foregrounded in the nihilistic conflict between 'living labour' and the machinations of capitalism at work in his fiction, which exude a devastating affect on the human subject. This is explicitly characterized in 'The

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[109] Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p. 21.

[110] Ligotti qtd. in Hall, 'Thomas Ligotti', p. 177: Similarly, in a later interview with Slawomir Wielhorski, Ligotti self-identifies as a 'moral nihilist'. Slawomir Wilhorski, 'Born to Fear: An Interview with Thomas Ligotti' (2012), in *Born to Fear: Interviews with Thomas Ligotti,* ed. by Matt Cardin (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2014)*,* 217–233 (p. 224).

[111] Ligotti qtd. in VanderMeer, 'Thomas Ligotti', p. 239.

[112] Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet*, p. 156.

Nightmare Network' in the non-too-subtle shift in the recognition of the employee as 'individual' and 'soul', to 'sensory-deprived' 'approved labour', then again, into rigidly and systematically controlled and emotionally vacant 'Employment Unit with autonomous or semi-autonomous programming', and finally, merely, 'cheap data'.[113] This is further evident throughout 'My Work is Not Yet Done' (the novella) as Ligotti, again, refers to the grotesque nature of the modern market's strategically nihilistic aim to manipulate all activity and human effort into the production of 'the ultimate product – Nothing', for which the empowered would 'command the ultimate price – Everything'.[114]

A similar conceit is evident throughout 'Special Plan', as the fissure between the demands of the company and continued existence of its employees opens up to a situation of transgressive, excessive nihilism that encourages tension, alienation and suffering as a means of production. Here the unnamed narrator seems to thrive in wake of the destruction he has wrought as he drives the town and its inhabitants 'to the vile and devious limit of [their] potential'.[115] The deviant protagonist embodies corporate nihilism, that is, he is the freakish embodiment of a compulsive and residual accumulation of violent thoughts, exploitation, and 'baseless purposes and dreams'.[116] However, his ability to recognise the baseless condition of existence and those around him makes him stand out and allows him to act in subversive and increasingly anti-subjective ways so as to 'affect persons [...] in a way that brings unsuspected [negative and supernatural] possibilities and purposes out of hiding'.[117] Ultimately, the qualities that bring the narrator into the company: 'the capacity to drive myself and others around me to the uppermost limits', are reflective of the deeply perverse operational/corporate logic that the company runs on, specifically, an obscene/destructive compulsion to exceed physical and ontological boundaries.[118] As a result, Ligotti's short story exposes one of the undermining causes of fracture between the company and the employee, namely, the way corporations push their

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[113] Ligotti, 'The Nightmare Network', pp. 171; 174; 177; 183.
[114] Ligotti, 'My Work', p. 43: In a later interview, Ligotti repeats this contention, arguing that the 'tragedy of capitalism and its corporations, [...] is that they are forced to give the least for the most. In general, their interests are not human in any meaningful sense. (Thomas Ligotti qtd. in Pål Flakk, 'Interview with Pål Flakk' *Gateavisa,* (2012) in *Born to Fear: Interviews with Thomas Ligotti,* ed. by Matt Cardin (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2014)*, 207–216 (p. 215)).
[115] Ligotti, 'Special Plan', p. 163.
[116] Ligotti, 'Special Plan', p. 166.
[117] Ligotti, 'Special Plan', p. 161.
[118] Ligotti, 'Special Plan', p. 161.

employees to transgress reasonable limits, encouraging disharmony, alienation and violent conflict as means of accruing benefit. It is telling that it is within 'a crumbling city surrounded by vast, decaying neighbourhoods' and 'hordes of wandering derelicts' that corporate opportunity presents itself because in the most pessimistic of pretences, it is destruction and horror that drives the subject towards new and terrifying possibilities.[119]

In this last instance, the corporation appreciates the masochistic damage that negativity instils within the workforce. Emblematic of this is the fact that, as we are told, 'supervisors would often be replaced in their positions because they were no longer capable of inspiring fresh images of violence in the minds of those they were charged with supervising'.[120] The unsettling relationship between the negative aspects of the workplace (microcosm for the human world at-large) and the pernicious excesses and follies of human/corporate ambition and subjectivity is again evinced in the 'direct correlation' between the expansion of the Blaine Company – a product of unfettered human egoism and drive – and the intensity of the poisonous and murderous yellow haze which envelops the city.[121] The haze is a consequence of a debasing and corrupting malign presence of Blaine's corporate ambitions and an excremental excess of the operations taking place within the corporation. That it spreads like a pestilence and shrouds the surrounding areas viscerally demonstrates the destructive reach of the human and corporate world. Indeed, our monstrous protagonist seems to point to this when he bids his colleagues observe the deranged 'natural tendency' of business, government and individuals to extend and expel themselves outwards into the world — 'thereby imposing themselves on the persons and things around them, imposing what they believe themselves to be without regard or respect for anything'.[122] Companies like the one *in My Work*, but also The Quine Organization, The Nightmare Network and the shadowy organisation in 'The Town Manager', thrive in Ligotti as exhibitions of the endpoint of existence, providing the reader with a sense of how the corporate; micro-context applies to the macro, to the wider state of negativity inherent in existence.

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[119] Ligotti, 'Special Plan', p. 163.
[120] Ligotti, 'Special Plan', p. 151.
[121] Ligotti, 'Special Plan', p. 145.
[122] Ligotti, 'Special Plan', pp. 155–6.

For Ligotti, capitalists are 'unadulterated savages', 'brutal and inhuman' and so long as we exist within this world, suffering is a requisite at their hands.[123] Likewise, the neoliberal values of (fiscal) growth, (market) freedom, the necessity of work, that are generated and espoused by systems, supervisors and the workplace within Ligotti's workplace horrors, are an 'inescapable delusion' obfuscating the nihilistic and apocalyptic ends of human egoism generally.[124] This sense of delusion, as we have seen, often corresponds in the obsessive and agitated psychological state of the individual.[125] Conversely, this tension and the managed disintegration of human individual consciousness has a blinding and productive effect, and must be encouraged in order for operations and the corporate entity (any by extension, for Ligotti, the human world) to function effectively. In 'Special Plan', Blaine's company managers operate on the basis of maintaining violent and tension-filled working environments and in 'The Nightmare Network', employees engage in ritual acts of psychological and corporeal violence against one another as means of revitalising the aggressive impulse necessary to function within the corporation.[126] Above all else, these acts of psychological reconditioning bring into focus the horror of the corporate environment: they disrupt and undermine any subjective or intellectual assumptions that the individual possesses, replacing them with often baseless nervous compulsions, a corporate persona, and a self-deprecating sense of embitterment. This results in an intolerable and debased sense of 'agony' and drive toward alternate fantasies of negation and 'an act of slaughter against yourself'.[127]

Ligotti's workplace horrors invite the reader to consider the compliant and resigned, nature of the human subject as worker who contributes to their own inescapable suffering. In this way, the spectral and malevolent systems of control within these texts are not the only contrivances to horror. Instead we perhaps need to look a bit deeper and critically at ourselves, to consider, as Cardin posits, that in Ligotti's fictional world, 'we cannot escape from the nightmare when the nightmare turns out to be our own soul'.[128] Throughout these texts, human resignation to personal

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[123] Ligotti qtd. in Hall, 'Thomas Ligotti', p. 177.

[124] Ligotti, 'My Work', p. 112.

[125] Ligotti, 'Special Plan', pp. 143–4.

[126] Ligotti, 'The Nightmare Network', p. 180.

[127] Ligotti, 'My Work', p. 7.

[128] Matt Cardin, 'The Transition from Literary Horror to Existential Nightmare in Thomas Ligotti's "Nethescurial"' (2003c) in *The Thomas Ligotti Reader: Essays and Explorations,* ed. by Darrell Schweitzer (Holicong: Wildside Press, 2003a), 72–77 (p. 77).

lack of control and the state of perpetual and existential misery occludes the value of any conventional transgressive, violent or affirmative-nihilistic alternatives in these pessimistic narratives. As a result, all that seems to remain for his characters is a self-destructive escape not from but into horror itself: a pessimistic movement towards destruction, decay and absolute negation that puts negativity into practice and raises deeply unnerving questions about the lack of individual and societal alternatives to the workings of late capitalism.

Thomas Ligotti's motivations for writing his most substantive workplace horror are concisely expressed in an interview with Thomas Wagner in which he states that he was inspired by a deep 'hatred of the system as considered in its broadest possible sense'.[129] The result of the hitherto described pseudo-antagonism between nightmarish, otherworldly forces and more-recognisable or identifiably capitalist organisations and apparatus is a pessimistic and pragmatic resignation towards the inevitability of life's movement towards 'disease, damage and death'.[130] In so doing, Ligotti establishes the metonymic quality of the metaphor hitherto outlined, as a way of connecting this to a fantasy of escape through the idea(l) of horrific and suicidal self-destruction. The consequence of this is a philosophical and fantasized movement towards self-destructive (dis)continuity either into or (ominously) out of the hopeless, degenerating human world. This abhorrent, degenerating human world (so often the backdrop to Ligotti's fiction) is recreated within 'My Work', as Frank Dominio notes the dismal presence of 'living ghosts' and 'human detritus' increasingly populating all spaces in the world. These ghostly remnants of the human populace represent not only the human waste being ever-more rapidly excreted by the corporate, capitalist world—but also, represent Ligotti's own pessimistic vision of a bleak (lack of) human futurity that 'awaits all the empires infesting this earth, not to mention the imminent fall of those fragile homelands of flesh we each inhabit'.[131] In 'My Work', this leads to an awakening that moves away from systemic criticism of micro-contexts, to an overarching philosophical imposition. Through a negative engagement with the corporate, the pointlessness of the capitalist system prevails, ultimately highlighting the author's denunciation and transgression of positivism and contention that life is

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[129] Ligotti qtd. in Wagner, 'Work Not Done?', p. 78.
[130] Ligotti qtd. in Wagner, 'Work Not Done?', p. 77.
[131] Ligotti, 'My Work', pp. 38–9.

meaningless; that there exists no viable solution or escape within this world; and that the possibility of suicide should be explored.

As confirmed in *Conspiracy,* Ligotti argues that any humanistic pretentions that we have either control of self-worth, agency and even a superiority to other beings is a false obscenity and a tragedy: 'We know too much to content ourselves with surviving, reproducing, dying' and we want there to be more to life – the tragedy, however, is that:

> [c]onsciousness has forced us into the paradoxical position of striving to be unself-conscious of what we are – hunks of spoiling flesh on disintegrating bones.[132]

Ligotti's work is seduced by death, but ultimately, death is not seen as a solution to end suffering. In 'My Work', such distinctive themes of human finitude and the lack of existential gratification or value resonate in Frank Dominio's perceptive, pessimistic diagnosis of his nauseating existential condition. Herein he identifies himself as little other than an 'inhuman malefactor', an existent cursed with the supernatural horror and nightmare of existence, 'with no good excuse for [his] abominable actions'.[133] The idea of reality that humans cling to and against which we define ourselves is absurd, serving only the demand that we be ever more effective and productive, our energies mere conduits toward more mendacious, destructive intentions.[134] This anxiety over a perceived lack of control repeatedly surfaces throughout the novella, as Dominio is overcome by one obsessive anxiety in his fear that the world of work, aided and abetted by a supernatural force, is conspiring against him.[135]

Throughout the text, the protagonist turns to ever more excessive demonstrations of meaningless affect in his transgressive (and supposedly retributive) actions which hold no value except that of a nominally Sadean, distractive pleasures they provide him.[136] Ultimately, Dominio's disgust towards the 'real' world corresponds with a wilful and violent rejection of it, characterised by his pessimistic retreat and

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[132] Ligotti, *Conspiracy*, p. 28.
[133] Ligotti, 'My Work', p. 74.
[134] See for example, Ligotti, 'My Work', p. 88.
[135] Chief amongst these conspirators is Richard, his boss, and the authoritarian leader of 'The Seven', whose workplace machinations ultimately lead to Dominio's contortion into an uncanny mass of destructive 'obsessive doubt and self-loathing' (Ligotti, 'My Work', p. 82).
[136] Illustrative of this point, the reader might turn to sections of 'My Work' in which Frank Dominio describes the various, ironic and sadistic means of exacting retributive action against the colleagues he accuses of plotting against him.

embrace of aesthetic decay and the catastrophic world. Throughout Ligotti's fiction, such images of catastrophe and decay are a prominent – even sublime – feature: 'An aesthetic of decay', he articulates, equates to a 'kind of serenity, a tranquil abandonment of the illusions of the future'.[137] Ligotti's characters exist in liminal, 'sideshow' worlds where aesthetic negativity is presented as inherent and inescapable, yet welcome. What makes characters such as Dominio intriguing as transgressive and radical figures is their unconventional appeal to catastrophe and their seduction by the aesthetic horror around them, a resignation that, in the context of these fictions, is akin to alternative or escapism.

Through his negation of the 'known' world, Dominio becomes perceptive to some semblance of an alternative, to:

> [A] world that is the exact opposite of the one (voice seething to a pitch) … the one I'm doomed by my own weakness and fear to live in (uncontrollable, meta-maniacal seething) … to live in during my weeks, my months, my years and years of work …[138]

Decay makes visible the ruinous state of human existence, it demonstrates 'the fate of everything that had ever been and awaited everything that would ever be' in ways that cannot be averted.[139] Moreover, the aesthetic of decay becomes a refuge in which fantasies of self-annihilation can take place without the trouble of death, it is an idealistic state that reveals the true nature of the world.[140] Dominio's near-suicidal shedding of his physical body (which follows a strange and disorientating blackout at the height of his obsessive and methodological rage) symbolises the extent of his will to negate or deviate from his own traumatic existence with the decaying world. Like the narrator in *Suicide by Imagination,* who confronts his own fallibility and frailty and chooses (perhaps masochistically, or perhaps tragically in the Cailloisian sense[141]) to imagine his own death to the point that his fantasy consumes him, self-destruction (aligned to the embrace of decay, suicide and/or self-negation) follows a pragmatic

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[137] Ligotti qtd. in Ayad, 'Literature Is Entertainment', p. 99.

[138] Ligotti, 'My Work', pp. 41–2.

[139] Ligotti, 'My Work', p. 38.

[140] Ligotti qtd. in Geoffrey H. Goodwin, 'Thomas Ligotti Interview' (2009) in *Born to Fear: Interviews with Thomas Ligotti,* ed. by Matt Cardin (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2014)*,* 145–54 (p. 153).

[141] The French literary critic and philosopher, Roger Caillois argued that: 'The tragic man […] sees the violent and contradictory forces that stir him […] but he affirms this reality that has left him no outlet other than crime', See: Roger Caillois, 'Brotherhoods, orders, secret societies, churches' in *The College of Sociology 1937–39,* ed. by D. Hollier (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 147. Unlike Caillois tragic heroes, those wanting to feel *more* or perhaps *really* alive and affirming themselves through transgression, here Ligotti's tragic man has a much different relationship to and use for transgression.

assessment as to life's perceived worth.[142] This is a pragmatic questioning that is also at the heart of Dominio's transgressive disorder. This dilemma is inexplicitly presented at the novel's conclusion when he must decide to continue with his retributive, distractive rampage or end his own life, once and for all.

By Dominio's rationality, 'we were brought into this world out of nothing' and are kept alive in some form or another, only 'as long as we [are] viciously thrashing about, expending some form of excessive, or excremental value to which the economy feeds on and 'never allowed to become still and silent' and thus unproductive.[143] Only when we have expended all of our useful energies, utilised ourselves completely within the nihilistic drive towards nothingness (most obviously exhibited in the pseudo-corporate fantasy of nothing for everything) do the unseen agents within this massive supernatural conspiracy that Ligotti targets, grant us the reprieve of being pulled back into the blackness to die. Ultimately death, in Ligotti's workplace horrors specifically, comes as a relief from the sustained delusions of the human ego and the nihilism of a horrific world and cannot come soon enough:

> I remember how wonderful it felt to die the little death of that cockroach in my apartment. I can only hope to know that feeling to its fullest when the moment comes and the river rushes in to drown me in its blackness. […] I cannot wait to be dead.[144]

However, to kill oneself is to cheat the process – a conclusion made explicit in Ligotti's short story, 'The Strange Design of Master Rignolo' in which the title character 'wanted out of this life without the pain and the fear' and was hastily made to suffer for his impertinence.[145]

One's death, does not resolve the problem of mortality, as the pain and suffering of life cannot be proven to be overcome by the act. This has been found by Master Rignolo and to an extent by Frank Dominio, who as the novella ends, is yet to experience death as a release. Neither does the welcoming of death in the fiction of Ligotti resolve the problem of our inherent meaninglessness, but rather, it exacerbates the problem. Instead, in these fictions the characters better enjoy a speculative contemplation of suicide as a requisite of the metaphysical nihilist approach to

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[142] Ligotti, 'Suicide by Imagination', in *Noctuary* (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2012), pp. 164–5.

[143] Ligotti, 'My Work', pp. 112–3.

[144] Ligotti, 'My Work', p. 138.

[145] Ligotti, 'The Strange Design of Master Rignolo' [1989], in *Noctuary* (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2012), p. 138.

existence that Ligotti seeks to explore. Speculatively speaking, 'death *can* solve the problem of *felt* meaninglessness', however as even one's total annihilation cannot definitively prove this wager, it seems – for David Benatar, at least – too high a price to pay in reality.[146] Whilst death 'does release us from suffering and, for that reason, is sometimes the least bad outcome', this cannot, Benatar argues, be reasonably be resolved against the cost of one's annihilation.[147] Despite this, suicide for the likes of Critchley, Benatar and Ligotti is not an effective means to every end, but when considered rationally can be warranted – at least philosophically – as I will explore in the final pages. For Ligotti's characters the philosophical question of suicide, both individually and collectively, surfaces throughout his oeuvre as the only viable or remaining means of alleviating the tragedy of their existential impasse.

As Berardi argued, suicide has 'come to be perceived increasingly as the only effective action of the oppressed, the only action which can actually dispel anxiety, depression and impotence'.[148] As seen in previous chapters concerning novels such as *American Psycho, Fight Club,* and *Millennium People,* for example, self-destructive nihilism often follows contemporary socio-political deadlocks. Though, as the chapters throughout this thesis have demonstrated, a conventional (if not extreme) transgression or radical action – such as violence or the physical self-harm by these texts' characters – is futile. In Ligotti's work, when the deadlock is an inherent, egoistical insistence upon the validity of existence, the means of breaking this impasse is a resounding insistence upon the invalidity and negation of conscious existence to explore the necessary life-denying possibilities presently absent. That is, to escape *into* horror – to accept, and even welcome negativity, be it aesthetic, affective or philosophical – becomes a means of alleviating the painful experience of cognisant existence in an increasingly nauseating and eerie sideshow world.

Leading on from this, it is important to note that Ligotti himself is a vocal advocate of antinatalism – that is, the belief that the world would be better off without human beings in it – and has written at length about the philosophical and speculative possibilities of a collective cessation of the human race. In their discussion of this, Xavier Aldana Reyes and Rachid M'Rabty point out that Ligotti's defence of

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[146] Benatar, *The Human Predicament,* p. 165.
[147] Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, pp. 2–3.
[148] Berardi, *Heroes,* p. 145.

antinatalism is not a sadistic gesture, but one that attributes less pain and suffering to non-existence and thus the escape from or negation of existence becomes an optimal state, at least notionally.[149] For Ligotti, antinatalism is a thought experiment that reflects a wider philosophical and existential pessimism as with regards to the apparent futility, meaninglessness and inherent pain and suffering wrought by human life. While he accepts the limited appeal of his position and that it has no chance of catching on, his works present suicide and antinatalism in deeply perturbing, aesthetic ways that allow the reader (and subject of the narrative) to explore both as modes of escape. In this way, the exploration of antinatalism is more than a simplistic opinion, but a praiseworthy aesthetic and philosophical device implemented against the degenerative realism of contemporary society and culture.

Writing in the mid-twentieth century, the Romanian philosopher and aphorist, E. M. Cioran argued that:

> [M]an is the delirious creature *par excellence,* victim of the belief that something exists, […] he need merely hold his breath: everything stops; suspend his emotions: nothing stirs; suppress his whims: the world turns to ashes. Reality is a creation of our excesses, of our disproportions and derangements.[150]

Taking his cue from Cioran, Ligotti's protagonist in 'My Work', believes that by killing himself he would also be 'killing every bad body on this earth'.[151] To his mind, suicide is an act of heroic proportions – justified in its response to the perceived horror and absurdity of human existence through an act of deviant or transgressive criminality, which seeks to change these circumstances for all.[152] For Dominio, the inherent persecutions and horrors of existence are correlative to his own awareness of them (products of the malicious 'gift' of consciousness). In response to this observation, Ligotti's protagonist posits a subversive challenge to those who valorise life, by suggesting that humankind's entire victimhood which Cioran passionately referred to, could be alleviated in the act of suicide.

Not only a means of undermining the baselessness and tragedy of human existence itself, here, Dominio's willing 'resignation' from, and 'forfeit' of life confirms the pessimistic desire to become nothing within the darkness of non-existence as a

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149 Aldana Reyes and M'Rabty, 'Better not to have been'.
150 E. M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay* (London: Penguin, 2010 [1949]), p. 14.
151 Ligotti, 'My Work', p. 136.
152 Ligotti, 'My Work', p. 136.

response/alternative to the contemptable existential anguish that underlies these fictions.[153] Willing self-destruction as reprieve (from, both, the grasp of corporate and neoliberal anxieties, and existential nausea and meaninglessness) may be read in the way Dominio welcomes the possibility of death. However, the unwavering pessimism, the banality and indeed, futility, of the suicidal act throughout Ligotti's work alludes to a possibility that troubles the author. Namely, that death may not prove the escape or end as hoped for: That individual suicide is not enough, as it ultimately resolves nothing of the widespread horror of existence that the nauseated subjected seems riveted to, except in the most narcissistic and fundamentally ineffective of ways.

In Thomas Ligotti's 'Metaphysica Morum', taken from *The Spectral Link,* the protagonist/antagonist makes a long statement outlining his motivations for his own self-destructive resignation that seems to chide against the hitherto described motivations of 'My Work's' suicidal protagonist. Outlining his conviction that humankind is a demoralized species, the narrator of 'Metaphysica Morum' proposes a mutation in thinking, as opposed to affective self-annihilation, that promotes *demoralization* as a means of coping with our otherwise eternal nightmare. In so doing, the narrator cites the absurd and existential malaise characterised by Levinas as the afore-described state of nausea. More so, he explicitly eludes to the suffering inherent to existence within the sideshow world and the lack of a viable alternative or escape, except for that which edges the subject ever-more towards self-defeating consequence. 'Those who contest demoralization', he begins, or those who stifle transgressive and pessimistic thought as a pragmatic assessment of this existential deadlock, and who still hold optimistic and affirmationist beliefs, 'have failed to see what is before them,' referring, of course, to the 'horrors of existence'.[154]

Again, Ligotti's suicidal pessimism rejects any didactic belief in salvation, yet the antinatalist proposition here alluded to is not that of the misanthrope or sadist, but that of truly transgressive and consciousness-raising philosophical enquiry.[155] For Ligotti, non-realist forms of literature, particularly transgressive and weird forms of horror, provide scope through which to explore despair and to disentangle the terrifying fascination with the very limits of reality and the human condition within the

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[153] Ligotti, 'My Work', p. 136.

[154] Ligotti, 'Metaphysica Morum', in *The Spectral Link* (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2014), p. 43; p. 44.

[155] See: Aldana Reyes and M'Rabty, 'Better not to have been'.

modern world. For the narrator of 'Metaphysica Morum', a future that seeks a 'freedom from suffering' can only be achieved through an acceptance of self-defeating demoralization, that is, through a transgressive pessimism that is manifest in the elimination of values and consciousness entirely – ego-death, in other words – and 'all who refuse it, will be denied the faintest glimpse of the absolute anesthetized future'.[156] He concludes:

> We are each either among the demoralized showing the way to a future of eternal nightmare, or we are losers celebrating our movement in hell.[157]

In this case, and as seen in the cases of the protagonists of the workplace horrors previously, the radical, truly transgressive gesture is not the affirmative, celebration of hellish existence. Nor is it specifically a suicidal end to life (although in certain cases this is deemed necessary), but in the pragmatic assessment and outright refusal of the absurdity of life and the willingness to self-destructively part with – to liberate ourselves – from consciousness itself, parent of all horrors by any means necessary.

Conclusion

As has been identified in this chapter, Ligotti's work is devoid of the overtly political and satiric elements evident in previous chapters of this dissertation. Instead, Ligotti's literary negation is based on the premise that our value and investment in systems of political and social order are baseless fallacies. That said, from these corporate and workplace settings and concerns, the same kinds of discontent, self-destructive impulses and existential traumas that have spurred on those hitherto mentioned authors are clear. Particularly evident is the desired fantasy of (non)existence and the wholly nihilistic transvaluation and transgression of cultural and political limits and values that falls somewhere close to the Schopenhauerian pessimistic philosophy that rejects the idealistic and illusionary phenomenalism. Also important is the Nietzschean critical diagnosis of life's omnipresent suffering and tragedy and later affirmation of

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[156] Ligotti, 'Metaphysica Morum', p. 44.
[157] Ligotti, 'Metaphysica Morum', pp. 44–5.

existence through nihilism and rejection of paradigm values, that I have hitherto referred to in Chapters Two and Three, particularly.

Stemming from a philosophical position of pessimistic realism and metaphysical nihilism, Ligotti's sympathy towards self-destruction is pronounced. But while the problem of suicide is teased out in his fictions, as has been identified, Ligotti's displeasure in individual self-destruction as a viable cure to humanity's ills is pronounced in the pessimistic tone of his work. Cioran argued that ultimately, suicide is too optimistic – 'too positive and assertive, too caught up in the fantasy of salvation through death'.[158] Likewise, for Ligotti, suicide is not necessarily the answer to the disconsolation of the existing subject, nor their suffering as (ab)used subject of capitalist/corporate societies, which many of his characters had hoped for. The most painful notion that survives reading Ligotti, then, is that perhaps there is no escape, no exit – or at least, no relief to be found in the negation or abandonment of self or the world. Away from his fiction, Ligotti, philosophically speaking, advocates antinatalism and the conscious decision by the entire human race to stop reproducing, thus leading to the extinction of the human race. For Ligotti, as no better alternative exists within this life to alleviate the suffering of being, empirically speaking, the discontinuation of life seems the most pragmatic response:

> Antinatalism is based on the principle that suffering of whatever kind or degree should not be caused or perpetuated, and that human existence necessarily entails suffering that we can neither escape nor justify, least of all by experiencing pleasures. Thus, the only way to end all suffering is to cease producing beings who suffer. In the abstract, I hold to that principle and believe that those who do not hold to it are simply of a different mindset. In everyday life, I live for the most part as a deluded individual except when I sit down and recall what I believe in principle.[159]

Self-destruction, on both an individual and communal level, as has been described in Ligotti's work, is bound up with fantasies of escape, delusions of the insecure mind and the perverse whims of an environment and/or corrosive force that relishes destruction. In response, there can be little to deny the rationality of the pessimist's response to the absurdity and sheer horror of it all – a rationality that transgresses the norm in its headfirst rush towards fatality. We can safely say that self-inflicted or

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[158] Critchley, *Notes on Suicide,* p. 72.

[159] Thomas Ligotti, qtd. in Nathaniel Katz, 'Interview: Thomas Ligotti' (2011), in *Born to Fear: Interviews with Thomas Ligotti,* ed. by Matt Cardin (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2014), 185–97 (p. 191).

willed termination of life in Ligotti does not confer to Jean Améry's thesis that suicide marks our capacity to achieve real freedom.[160] Instead, a lack of alternative and escape from the nausea and discontent cultivated by our existential predicament in the contemporary world, for Ligotti's characters, at least, justifies their antipathy towards life and transgressive actions.

As far as a viable escape through suicide is concerned however, Critchley's suggestion in *Notes on Suicide* is perhaps closest to that which is afforded in Ligotti's pessimistic and transgressive sideshow fantasies. Critchley suggests that:

> Perhaps the closest we come to dying is through writing, in the sense that writing is a leave-taking from life, a temporary abandonment of the world and one's pretty preoccupations to try to see things more clearly. In writing, one steps back and steps outside life in order to view it more dispassionately, both more distantly and more proximately. With a steadier eye. One can lay things to rest in writing: ghosts, hauntings, regrets, and the memories that flay us alive.[161]

Thomas Ligotti likewise argues the same point when he describes the act of writing as an act of affirmation akin to that of suicide. Both, he argues are 'vital idealistic gestures' that 'express conviction'.[162] And yet, 'while no one has ever been *cured* by committing suicide', the act of writing horror stories – while most certainly not an act of 'curative catharsis' – is a degenerative act that remains the 'best possible vehicle for conveying the uncanny nightmare of a conscious mind marooned in this haunted house of a world and being driven mad by the ghastliness of it all'.[163]

In totally practical terms, Ligotti's pessimistic thesis concludes that no affirmative response is possible. His work implies that there is no way 'out' of the system (socio-economic or ontological) that does not in some way involve a destruction of the subject in some form or another. His pessimistic horror negates the real world in the most thoroughgoing and depressive of ways. The abandonment of hope in his work follows an awakening of 'demonic delight' that allows us to 'pull our own strings of fate with collapsing', that is, to experience the often spiteful or sadistic pleasures of ontological disregard that are otherwise inconsistent with personal and

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[160] Jean Améry, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death,* trans. by John D. Barlow (Bloomington, IN.: Indiana University Press, 1999 [1976]).
[161] Critchley, *Notes on Suicide,* p. 17.
[162] Ligotti and Ayad, 'Literature Is Entertainment', p. 96.
[163] Ligotti and Ayad, 'Literature Is Entertainment', pp. 106; 96.

societal wellbeing.[164] As with the previous authors entertained in this thesis, the process of writing offers a way in which to fantasize about and work-out (philosophically speaking) a response to and means of transgressing the existential and societal impasses of concern. At a period when transgression seems to have lost much of its power to affect its reader, or incite a viable response to the status-quo, the authors studied thus far, through their multifaceted and self-destructive exposés on violence, nihilism, sadism and suicide, relentlessly and provocatively imagine alternatives to, and negate – for better or worse – a moral-neoliberal contemporary world so adept at recoding dissident action to its own strength.

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[164] Ligotti, *Conspiracy,* pp. 93; 94.

CONCLUSION — POST-HOPE FICTIONS, OR 'NO HAPPY ENDINGS, NO APOLOGIAS, NO EXCUSES, NO REDEMPTION, [AND] NO ESCAPE'[1]

When a subject cannot change, challenge or attack the source of their angst and ire, they may choose to attack or enact a self-defeating / self-destructive change in themselves in order to alter their position within and against a pervasive, ever fluid and abstract or unattainable target. Through close examination of *American Psycho, Fight Club*, *Haunted, Super-Cannes, Millennium People,* and *My Work is Not Yet Done* (and other short fictions), I have argued that when subjects challenge themselves, they incidentally rebel against the networks, fluxes and ontological paradigms that codify their understanding and experience of the world. As recalled in Chapter Four, Levinas argues that an escape – in the abstract sense – is characterised by the incredulity towards or negation of ontological absolutes. Escape, in this way, seeks a confrontation with the 'nausea' (or horror, as other writers here explored have suggested,) of existence.[2] This 'quest for the way out', for Levinas, however, 'is no sense of nostalgia for death because death is not an exit', and as explored throughout this thesis, death offers little by way of a practical solution to the fundamental crises afflicting those within these works of fiction.[3] Nonetheless, when subjects destroy themselves, they bring into question the possibility of enacting a truly radical alternative that otherwise cannot be fully envisaged. These self-destructive activities explored throughout this thesis are interesting in so far as they negate the affirmationist excessive and productive ideals that are hard-coded within the 'rational' individual, and which serve the material needs of neoliberal capitalism. In this way, self-destruction defies the naturalisation of neoliberal and postmodern values that regulate our behaviours and demand our compliance. Against a late-twentieth/twenty-first century Anglo-American culture that is devoid of cause for hope and optimism, self-destruction faces up to the reality of existential horror. In this way, transgression

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[1] Ligotti and Ayad, 'Literature Is Entertainment', p. 96.
[2] See Chapter Four, pp. 197 – 8 of this thesis.
[3] Levinas, *On Escape,* p. 67.

and pessimism are pragmatic responses to, and aversions of, existential and material concerns faced in the real world.

The controversial French author Michel Houellebecq wrote that '[l]ife is painful and disappointing. It is useless, therefore, to write new realistic novels. We generally know where we stand in relation to reality and don't care to know any more'.[4] As demonstrated through close readings of notable works by Bret Easton Ellis, Chuck Palahniuk, J. G. Ballard and Thomas Ligotti, and in readings of critics such as Berardi, Blanchot, Botting, Critchley, Fisher, Levinas, Noys, Thacker and Žižek, for example, it seems that the contentious text, above all else, diagnoses and distracts from the palpable discontent and suffering attributable to existence in the contemporary world. What is more, literature's engagement with horror, as Thacker argues, offers a necessary 'bypass [of] rational thought altogether in favour of the affective extremism of fear and death'.[5] Throughout this dissertation I have sought to maintain this position, eschewing any singular utilitarian reading or viable political application of transgression and self-destruction in favour of a speculative examination of each in the field of contemporary literatures. In doing so, I have shown that transgressive fantasies work as distraction and respite from the disconcerting realities of postmodern, neoliberal society within contemporary fiction. For many the reading of horror, self-destruction, violence and nihilism as a diversion or reprieve might be abhorrent, as ultimately this does not address the reality or the lack of viable escape from existing oppressive ideological structures. Nonetheless, in consideration of this often-extreme subject matter, I have launched an important transvaluation of how we intellectually engage with such tropes. In so doing, through a close critical engagement with key post-1990s fictions, I have sought to redirect much of the critical ground towards further thought and consideration of the philosophical and aesthetic value of self-destruction and transgression in literatures to come.

In one of his more unnerving monologues, Patrick Bateman recalls how 'everything failed to subdue [him]', owing to a 'depersonalization [that] was so intense, had gone so deep, that the normal ability to feel' had been eradicated.[6] Similarly, the narrator of *Fight Club* provocatively suggests that 'everyone smiles with that invisible

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[4] Michel Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life,* trans. by Dorna Khazeni (London: Gollancz, 2006 [1991]), p. 29.
[5] Thacker, *Tentacles Longer Than Night*, p. 116.
[6] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 271.

gun to their head'.[7] Wilder Penrose, in equally contentious fashion argues that 'people no longer need enemies', that 'in this millennium their great dream is to become victims. Only their psychopathologies can set them free'.[8] Finally, and perhaps most disconcertingly, the narrator of 'My Case for Retributive Action' admits his belief that 'the world itself, by its very nature, is unendurable. It's only our responses to this fact that deviate'.[9] Each of these statements eruditely raises the question of transgression's apparent 'waning of affect', which Fredric Jameson describes at length in *Postmodernism* (1991). This waning of affect, for Jameson, follows the 'disappearance of the individual subject' and the transformation and commodification of human subjects into images, embodiments of 'a virtual deconstruction of the very aesthetic of expression itself'.[10] The erasure or dissolution of any meaningful affect or feeling has led to a profound sense of cultural, artistic and political cynicism characterised by the 'modish detachment from feeling anything'.[11] By way of response, the need has emerged for an alternative to a problematic postmodern and neoliberal culture in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that has vehemently pushed subjects towards alienation, consumption, compulsion and complicity in (or cynical acceptance of) the naturalisation of these negativistic or damaging values. These fictions have attempted to pursue this alternative by taking postmodern conditions of cynicism, pessimism and cultural apathy to their extreme and exploring the expressive possibilities of self-destructive transgression in the wake of postmodernity's supposed unendurable nihilism.

The period to which *American Psycho* responds (and which begins this investigation) marks the beginning of what is widely recognised as the contemporary era, or the era of capitalist realism as described by Fisher.[12] This period is distinguishable as one in which the values of acceleration, consumption and capitalism have contrived towards a self-destructive culture wherein selfhood and agency have been sacrificed in the compulsive and nihilistic pursuit of excess (often an excess of nothingness) upon which the foundations of this characteristically abstract and

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[7] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 19.
[8] Ballard, *Super-Cannes*, p. 365.
[9] Ligotti, 'My Case for Retributive Action', p. 88.
[10] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992 [1991]), pp. 16; 11.
[11] Adam Roberts, *Fredric Jameson: Routledge Critical Thinkers* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 124.
[12] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*.

absolutist modern form of capitalism lay.[13] As argued in Chapter One, Bateman's response to this situation is a rapacious craving for violence that initiates the wider critique of the extent to which acting out, within an already violent and excessive capitalist realist cultural environment, must fail to convene the desired, subversive intention.

In anticipation of such an epoch and its deleterious effects on the contemporary subject, Bateman details the extent of his growing awareness that violent actions and fantasies are characteristically meaningless. In so doing, he identifies a central concern that is more widely found in transgressive fictions in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Namely, he questions the extent to which entropic transgression remains capable of inciting a desired subversion, lapse or contravention to an abstract, totalising and ever-growing socio-political and cultural hegemonic order. Whilst nihilism is evident in the grotesque and meaningless violence in Ellis's novel and the works of Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti, the pessimistic sense of all-encompassing blankness to which Bateman responds reflects a wider philosophical inertia afflicting the subject(s) of transgressive fiction. Throughout the preceding chapters, I have alluded to the rigorous attempts within transgressive fiction to reposition the subject as a radical and contested expedient, translating self-destruction as a subversive discourse. In their often satirical and horrific approaches to nihilism and transgression, these fictions are important, reflective studies of the same socio-cultural and political frustrations as their real-world counterparts. Addressing concerns such as reification of the subject into the mechanisms of neoliberalism and the erasure of subjectivity and meaning, they demonstrate a capacity to respond to the ills of neoliberalism and the tumultuous sense of 'dissolution, fragmentation and the loss of clear ethical measure' in a late twentieth and twenty-first century Anglo-American context.[14]

In the wake of this, the narrative arc of some of television's most memorable characters in recent years are often premised on making an exhibition of their subjective breakdowns and pursuit of ultimately self-destructive activities, in much the same way as those explored throughout this thesis. In Vince Gilligan's critically

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[13] Berardi, *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility* (London: Verso, 2017); Franco Berardi, *And: Phenomenology of the end* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2015b); Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2009); Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2013 [2002]).
[14] Matthews, *Ethics and Desire*, p. 10.

acclaimed crime-drama television series *Breaking Bad* (2008–13), Walter White (Bryan Cranston), a struggling and fatigued high school teacher, following a diagnosis of lung cancer begins manufacturing high-grade and illegal methamphetamines. The series follows his acceleration and descent into criminality, violence and ultimately death as he transgresses all auspices of his unremarkable suburbanite life. In Bryan Fuller's psychological-horror series *Hannibal* (2013–15), an adaptation of the Thomas Harris novels, Will Graham (Hugh Dancy), a talented but mentally unstable criminal psychologist, is used by the FBI to help them catch a host of depraved and sadistic killers. In his pursuit of several grotesque killers, Graham, at the expense of his own mental stability and moral coordinates, must self-consciously and recklessly throw himself into the mind of the transgressor to the point wherein he struggles to recognise where he himself ends and the deranged murderer begins. In Sam Esmail's Golden Globe winning psychological thriller *Mr. Robot* (2015–19), Elliot Alderson (Rami Malek), a cyber-security engineer and computer hacker increasingly becomes involved in activities of cyber-terrorism and anarchism as a distraction from his struggles to cope with self-destructive drug addictions, social anxieties and an ever-more violent and pronounced dissociative personality disorder. Finally, in Raphael Bob-Waksberg's animated black comedy *Bojack Horseman* (2014–present), the eponymous protagonist (Will Arnett), a middle-aged former sit-com star, struggles to reconcile his own childhood traumas, ego, alcoholism and depression, and descends even deeper into a pit of cyclical inertia and self-loathing. In so doing, he inadvertently turns to self-destruction as a distraction from his haunting, depressingly isolated and surreal entrapment within the postmodern bubble of 'Hollywoo(d)'. For many of these protagonists/antagonists, their breakdowns are attributable to a desire to self-destruct that can be simultaneously read as means of surviving or negating their normative worlds. The self-destructive spirit identified in this thesis to be running through a host of important late-twentieth and early twenty-first century fictions has undoubtedly found an even wider audience as these kinds of narratives and self-destructive archetypes begin to be translated onto our screens.

Terry Eagleton argues that as a means of easing the strain of the sheer intolerability of modern existence, writers have sought to 'portra[y] a world in which there is indeed no salvation, but, on the other hand, nothing to be saved [either]'.[15] For

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[15] Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Penguin, 2003) pp. 57–58.

Eagleton, this hopelessness and pessimism characterises the 'post-tragic realm of postmodernism'.[16] As a result, hope is something of a capitalist illusion that further condemns the subject to 'pain now, more pain later'.[17] For Fisher, it is a passive effect 'aris[ing] from our incapacity to actually act' and is a fundamental component of a system that seeks to deflate and pacify the radical subject.[18] Even more bleakly, for Lauren Berlant, optimism actually becomes an 'obstacle to your flourishing'.[19] Optimism is both cruel and undesirable as it serves to maintain an impossible relation – that of the subject to a fantasy or idealism, which is itself inherently tied to cultural and political ideals of capitalism – that only frays into, amongst other things, depression, dissociation, and cynicism when 'the ordinary [life] becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises'.[20] In response, the interest of the reader/audience within this contemporary, post-hope epoch is now firmly piqued by the transgressions, breakdown and self-destruction of those who cannot (or will not) maintain a hopeful façade of propriety or morality that they see as contributing to their sense of entrapment, frustration and antipathy.

Describing the turn from affirmationist transgression to negativistic and nihilistic self-destruction in a range of fictions, I have also proposed a critical genealogy that readdresses antithetical discursive tropes as previously developed by the likes of Sade and Bataille and has manifested in the fiction of a generation of late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century transgressive authors. By highlighting the discernible and crucial alteration in their emphasis, I have traced how the ethos of resistance has more generally shifted. In contemporary fiction this switch, which is characterised in literary reactions to (and engagement with) violence, nihilism and self-destruction, has been exacerbated in lieu of any valid or rational political and economic alternative. Furthermore, it is evident that in their responses, the subjects of novels like *Haunted, Super-Cannes* and *My Work is Not Yet Done,* come to a realisation (or resignation) that they are themselves the only tangible targets to be fought within a capitalist realist world that has co-opted the tropes of resistance into its own assimilationist corpus.

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[16] Eagleton, *After Theory,* p. 58.

[17] Mark Fisher, 'Pain Now' (2015), in Mark Fisher, *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher from 2004–2016,* ed. by and Darren Ambrose (London: Repeater, 2018), 567–572 (p. 569).

[18] Mark Fisher, 'Abandon Hope (Summer is Coming)' (2015b), in Mark Fisher, *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher from 2004–2016*, ed. by and Darren Ambrose (London: Repeater, 2018), 573–584 (p. 578).

[19] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (London: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 1.

[20] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* p. 3.

The aims of this thesis have been clear throughout. Firstly, I have interrogated the continued application of and faltering effectiveness of transgression, violence and excess to re-address their critical importance in contemporary fiction as a means of articulating a response to existential and socio-political concerns. Secondly, I have analysed the application of nihilism and self-destruction as an important critical device and counter-narrative in contemporary literature. Finally, I have established how the fantasy of self-destruction extends a theoretical and literary desire to articulate an alternative to, or fantastic negation of, a dehumanising postmodern and capitalist realist scenario. In this thesis, I have positioned the study of fictions of self-destruction at the heart of an attempt to re-validate transgression and nihilism in contemporary literary fiction. In so doing, I have evidenced the persistence of both as radical artistic devices at a time when their value has been severely questioned. My intervention has centred on the examination of self-destruction as the key philosophical or affective issue. The extent to which a number of authors have turned to the act or fantasy of self-destruction to explore some fantasised means of alternative or escape from an otherwise insufferable and inescapable contemporary moment is evident – it has, in fact, become itself a narrative impulse. The shift towards even-more contentious literary scenes and fantasies of self-destruction reveal, I argue, an important, creative revalidation of the aesthetic, ethical and sometimes political value of such tropes in response to the degenerative experience of existing in the contemporary world. In other words, they are not just reactive, but also active and ideologically engaged. They encapsulate generational discontent but find no answer that does not first begin with the partial, often total, destruction of what we know, importantly including the self.

In what follows, I will briefly recap the major points raised in this thesis before reinforcing the critical necessity and urgency of examining some of literatures' transgressive propagators who consider self-destruction as a means of inciting change in the world (or at least, in the subject's outlook on that world). Following this, I conclude that these fictions show we must now move beyond a reading of affirmative or outwardly-directed transgression which, I have argued, proves to offer no exit at all, and instead towards a critical assessment of the aesthetic and intellectual or imaginative possibilities of self-destruction within contemporary fiction as a thought

provoking, antagonistic and transgressive enterprise within a pessimistic, post-hope culture.[21]

As identified in Chapter One, Patrick Bateman does not routinely engage in acts of violence against himself, although his actions inadvertently see to his reification into capitalism at a significant cost of his own sanity and status. This is central to the critique of neoliberal and postmodern culture in the late twentieth century implied in the novel and raises the necessity of reclaiming self-destruction as a purposeful and speculative means of resisting an inescapable system. While Chapter One did not seek to position *American Psycho* as a novel wrought with entropic self-destruction, it has demonstrated that when a conventional model of subversion fails to incite anything other than a deeper sense of malaise or a reliance on the system itself, a new possibility must be sought. The exploration of this possibility became central to my reading of the novels of Chuck Palahniuk, J. G. Ballard and Thomas Ligotti. In the progression from Chapter One to Chapter Four, I described this shift towards an explicit and provocative desire for self-destruction as respite or solution to the perceived tyranny of postmodern and neoliberal culture as wrought by unachievable targets, dehumanised and isolationist technologies of society and work, and incapacity for ultimate fulfilment.

In Chapter Two, I considered the extent to which the transgressive subject (and community) attempted an undoing or disentangling of themselves from frustrating and oppressive cultures marked by tedious and soul-destroying labour, overpowering consumerism and existential angst. In *Fight Club* and *Haunted* it was through disobedience, the negation of society and ultimately death, that individuals and groups were able to reassert some modicum of control over their lives in attempts to avoid falling victim to the same 'slow, purposeful erasure' cited in *American Psycho.*[22] Through activities that amount to self-destruction (both in a real and abstract sense), the relationship between subject and culture/society becomes altered. As identified in my reading of Palahniuk, the shared experience of death (or death's immanence) motivates characters to re-imagine themselves within and outside of society. Indeed, the prospect of self-destruction incites much excitement and recalls Bataille's argument that truly transgressive activity is a fantasy that exceeds the rational and

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[21] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 384.
[22] Ellis, *American Psycho,* p. 271.

self-preserving. As a result, I concluded that excessive and often terminal forms of transgression as violence, nihilism, the abandonment of society, self-harm and suicide pertain to eschatological and metaphysical fantasies of subversion.

In Chapter Three the pathologies of both subject and society were laid bare and exposed as an acceleration and embrace of eroticism, consumption, violence, perversion (often towards a terminal extreme) is sought in Ballard's late fictions as respite from idiosyncratic, cultural prerogatives. Ballard's provocative and sometimes incendiary novels question the extent to which these activities are complicit in the dominance of the very same socio-cultural and political model that is the cause of such angst and ire in the very first place. This chapter highlighted the tension that emerged when the 'victims' of postmodernity become aware of their inability to freely express their anti-cultural politics and anti-subjective frustration towards the machinations of the very system they detest. Despite this, throughout this chapter I identified that underlying the scenes of failed rebellion and complicity in transgressive communal activities is a masochistic and nihilistic desire to experience a fall or debasement as an eschatological, subversive fantasy. In this way, the embrace of psychopathology throughout these fictions reveals a self-destructive and dissociative demand for a somewhat fatalistic alternative to a dystopian, modern capitalist culture and society.

As Ballard's late fictions explore the possibility (and tangibility) of transgression and self-destruction as an escape within a fundamentally dystopian setting, Chapter Four examined the necessity of a total escape from materialist existence itself. In Ligotti's fiction, realist interpretations of the world are abandoned as the reader is transported into a series of uncanny and dystopian sideshows that subvert convention and render perversity, nihilism and self-destruction normative or desirable. Self-destruction is here considered an imperative. For Ligotti's protagonists, life itself – whether one is the victim of postmodern and neoliberal societies or not – is an experience of undue suffering, pain and inconsequentiality. For this reason, in the horrific and eerie worlds constructed by Ligotti, characters engage in affective and philosophical transgressions that culminate in a relinquishment of subjectivity and life itself as a respite from continued existential despair. What is critically significant (particularly to literary and cultural studies of transgression) is the critical readdress of self-destruction not as a means to re-establish a subverted value or order, but means instead of negating the ontological paradigms and systems that inform our experience

of the real world entirely. If 'everyone smiles with that invisible gun to their head', then self-destructive fatalism brings the subject a sense of relief. In the fictions here examined, this is motivation enough to act in often pathological way within a world that they feel increasing antipathy towards.[23] In so doing, these fictions have favoured the somewhat spiteful, pessimistic and nihilistic relinquishment of any remaining ties to the real world as an imaginative or eschatological possibility in lieu of any viable option following the failure and the co-option of radical, affirmationist or transgressive political action.

In my four author studies I have assessed the continued validity of transgressive tropes in fiction distinctive for its existential and socio-political nihilism, frustration and a seeming failure to articulate a response or alternative to the status quo. Moreover, I have considered the implications of what follows when a text, or the characters therein, renege on optimistic and/or affirmative pursuits and turn their ire against the ever-suffering, offending subject themselves. As explored in my introduction, in recent decades there has been an upturn in the critical engagement with the literary tropes of terror, horror, transgression and the extent to which they are co-opted as commodities of declining effectiveness in an age of cultural postmodernity. In response, a narrative emerges which contends that a rethinking of transgression (its forms, its validity and indeed its very possibility) is an urgent critical concern.[24] Underscored in this thesis is that the possibility of 'real' transgression both haunts the subject and is central to the (re)formation of subjectivity against contemporary society and culture. Self-destruction (as antithetical and irrational as it may seem) is, therefore, considered a means to address the underlying, existential concern with agency in the contemporary worlds presented in these fictions. In response, my contribution to the wider field of contemporary literary criticism has been to demonstrate that an engagement with entropic and philosophical self-destruction is a constructive means to reimagine, channel and even radically challenge existential and socio-political discontent. In *Fight Club* and *Haunted*, for example, an engagement with death and fantasies of destroying and reimagining oneself become outlets for

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[23] Palahniuk, *Fight Club,* p. 19.

[24] This is particularly evident in criticism that has sought to reinstate the body as a site to be transgressed and argues that, in turning to horror and corporeality, a counter-narrative to the acceptable emerges. See for example: Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Horror Film and Affect: Towards a Corporeal Model of Viewership* (London: Routledge, 2016); Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014).

otherwise disassociated or dispirited groups to pursue some form of an alternative, antagonistic or rebellious way of living. Similarly, in *My Work is Not Yet Done* and *Millennium People*, following the failures of any viable socio-political challenge to hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, the exploration of self-destructive and nihilistic transgressive fantasies speaks to a spiteful desire for *jouissance* within a world devoid of any other motivating or revivifying cause.

I have cited Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard, and Ligotti's works as seminal to the diagnosis of this trend and argued that self-destructive tropes are becoming ever-more pronounced in contemporary fictions. Nevertheless, the lack of female authors here examined might infer that transgressive fictions more roundly are inherently tied to notions of a masculinity in crisis. A gendered approach to contemporary transgressive fictions would undoubtedly raise some very interesting questions that this thesis cannot, due to spatial constraints, address, especially since self-destructive tropes are evident in the influence of Angela Carter, Kathy Acker and Joan Didion. In this thesis I have actively resisted an overt engagement with the theme of masculinity in crisis in contemporary literature and have chosen these works because they have each offered specific and critical means to address the existential crisis pertaining to all human subjects in the modern world in ways that a gender-focused approach would not. In *American Psycho* and *Fight Club,* for example, Bateman and the unnamed protagonist are read as indicative of a generation of human beings living in the shadow of capitalist realism, rather than as models of toxic or endangered masculinity. Even more tellingly, in Ligotti's fiction, I have shown that the crises addressed are tied to notions of existential despair that transcend gender. Indeed, a gendered reading in these fictions would miss the point of the anti-natalist philosophy that sees human existence altogether as entirely undesirable. Fundamentally, I focused on these authors because they each present serious and intriguing engagements with what it is like, above all else, to be human in the contemporary world.

Throughout this investigation, I have also challenged the idea that if a text does not make explicit overtures towards a progressive solution or a valid counter-model to the conditions to which it responds, then little critical value can be extracted from the text/study. This critique is one routinely levelled to the study of the humanities more generally and is eruditely challenged by Catherine Spooner who states that:

> The humanities are increasingly pressed to prove their utility, whether expressed in economic terms – stimulating the culture industries – or moral ones – creating well-rounded human beings and cultivating active citizenship. […] This practice results in a new kind of elitism that seems opposed to its original purpose. […].[25]

In her defence of the Gothic, Spooner argues that even beyond 'utility', aestheticism can also be valid reason enough for their study and critical appeal. Moreover, for Spooner, the 'the critical need to justify Gothic through its utility has actually resulted in a narrow understanding of its possibilities'.[26] By the same standard I have taken the position that the study of transgressive fictions and specifically entropic and philosophical representations of self-destruction need not 'bear the ideological burden of the humanities in crisis'.[27] They should not be required to propose a model for how a culture or society should respond to, or make use of, transgression in the real world. Instead, I have argued that they be approached in a way that values the ingenuity of their treatment of self-destruction as a literary and abstract thought-experiment. Throughout I have resisted the attraction to read these fictions as responses to the purely material and political concerns of their historical era. Instead I have explored the ways in which texts like *Haunted* and *Super-Cannes* demonstrate that the speculative exposition of transgression and self-destruction is important as it provides an opportunity to explore the fantasy of an escape from an otherwise inescapable order, that is not necessarily possible in realist or utilitarian modes of fiction.

Lastly, in this thesis, I have grappled with the idea that transgression may be 'dead' as a register for individual and cultural anxieties, deviancies and frustrations. I have questioned the extent to which we are perhaps culturally 'beyond' a kind of transgression that has become reified into the system and cultural logic of postmodern, neoliberal capitalism, or that which is centred on the crossing of moral or juridical limits. Instead, through an aesthetic and philosophical engagement with self-destructive transgression, limits cannot only be crossed, but more importantly, negated and undermined entirely to the benefit of creative, aesthetic and philosophical possibility. Many may still question the critical value exists of a/n celebration/advocacy of transgressive and pessimistic forms of retreatism or negation. Such critiques, however, distract from the real problem inferred by the turn to pessimism and negation

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[25] Catherine Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of 'Happy Gothic',* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 15.

[26] Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic*, p. 17.

[27] Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic*, p. 17.

that is particularly exemplified in Ligotti's fiction, or in *Millennium People,* for example. Namely that there seems to be a definite lack of any viable material, aesthetic or philosophical alternatives that do not, in essence, begin with the total obliteration of present structures of social and clerical division. The adoption of non-realist or nihilistic forms of protest and disengagement in these works of fiction (and which are mostly evident in the varying forms of self-destruction exhibited) marks a creative engagement with the notion of escape wherein the realist approach to this has seemingly failed. I have thus aimed to raise the critical value of a speculative alternative that allows for a much more nuanced critical reading of the pessimistic and negativistic tropes in contemporary fiction. The texts I have explored in detail do not so much betray the exhaustion of transgression, but its continued relevance, showing themselves as important responses to an increasingly perverse, totalising and destructive culture since the 1990s. In this way, transgression becomes not just crucial to the process of declaiming the many injustices and real cost of neoliberal economy and ideology on the modern individual, but the only honest response. To imagine one's own self-destruction is, in these fictions, to engage with a spiteful fantasy that discloses the enmity towards a culture that has stripped away any vestiges of individuality or radicalism, and to explore of the allure of horror and nihilism as a distraction from the otherwise inescapable torment of material reality.

Self-destruction poses an alternative beyond a realm wherein, for many authors and critics, no other satisfactory resolution is realistically possible. The extended study of horror and fantasies of self-destruction and its growing appeal beyond Anglo-American fictions is a markedly important area for further study that would address the proficiency of self-destruction as an attractive critical register for the antipathy and incredulity towards politics, culture and indeed existence more roundly in a globalised context. This thesis then concludes by vouching for a critical approach that develops and extends a speculative model of scrutiny into other forms of post-millennial transgressive fiction and into other narrative media, especially film and tv and in a global/transnational context. The critical engagement with aesthetic and philosophical self-destruction in transgressive and non-realist fictions is wrought with subversive possibilities that need not be read as reactive, negative or void. For their readers, the works of Easton Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti may be entertainment as much as they are a radical engagement with the inevitable cycle of suffering, malaise and

discontent attributable to life itself but greatly exacerbated by the current socio-political moment. Ultimately, the fatalistic, pessimistic and nihilistic implications of transgressive and self-destructive actions may not adhere to a desired, positivist philosophy, but empty positivism and blind hope for the future have been proven equally untenable or insufficient as beacons for change. As markers of their time, fictions of self-destruction are essential to an understanding of the contemporary neoliberal period, but also raise the dilemma of what should follow next. As Fisher writes, 'we don't need hope; what we need is confidence and the capacity to act'.[28] Active political forms of fiction predicating alternative types of social and economic systems that do not rely on hierarchy and mass discontentment might be an answer, but horror and satire, by their very nature, have the capacity to, and will continue to explore the negative and anxious part of our society. As demonstrated in relation to Ligotti's horrors, Ballard's dystopias and Ellis and Palahniuk's transgressive satires, these literatures revel in their depictions of negative excess, desolation and destruction. They expose the darker and more contentious aspects of culture and challenge the integrity of 'logical' or 'acceptable' socio-political values. Crucially, they establish the importance of a critical exploration of nihilism and self-destruction as an eschatological project or distraction from socio-cultural dissatisfaction and ontological or existential anxiety in late-twentieth and early twenty-first century fiction. In a sense, all future meaningful fiction will need to emerge from a place of violence and discontent, if it is to alter or disturb anything at all. As I have shown, literary writers are suggesting that burning to the ground the foundations of what we currently are and starting completely anew might not just be a pervasive eschatological fantasy, but as implied in the works of Ellis, Palahniuk, Ballard and Ligotti, this could potentially prove to be the only feasible answer to a crucial, contemporary ideological impasse.

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[28] Mark Fisher, 'Abandon Hope (Summer is Coming)', p. 578.

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