Establishing the Continuum: Postmodernism, Twenty-First Century Culture, and American Fiction

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Abstract

This thesis argues postmodernism is altered and repeated rather than succeeded, producing a postmodern continuum that stretches into the twenty-first century. Initially, a selection of canonical late twentieth century American postmodern texts are analysed (Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*). These novels are used to illustrate the anxieties over advanced capitalism's totalising dominance that are repeated in contemporary American culture. Next, a variety of twenty-first century novels are interrogated (Amanda Filipacchi's *Love Creeps*, Zané Sachs' *Sadie: The Sadist*, Dennis Cooper's *God Jr.* and *Zac's Control Panel*, Alexandra Kleeman's *You Too Can Have A Body Like Mine*, and Tao Lin's *Taipei*). These texts demonstrate a selection of the discrete ways that postmodernism is repeated in contemporary American fiction. The chapters focus upon cultural integration, reapplication, counter-intuitive replication, and politicised nostalgia as distinct yet related ways that postmodern aesthetics are repeated in contemporary American culture. Together, these novels trace a shift within postmodernism since its peak in eighties American culture. These forms of repetition illustrate the distinct and at times contradictory ways a postmodern continuum persists, providing a new way of considering its connection to the present moment.

By prioritising repetitions of postmodernism over its succession, this thesis stages an intervention that provides an original contribution to knowledge. It considers the marginalised connection to postmodernism in literary scholarship, particularly critics who articulate a succession from postmodernism while drawing upon its texts and aesthetics. It also interrogates how the plurality of theories defining an 'after' postmodernism internalise and repeat its methodological practices, particularly the inability to construct alternative grand narratives. I argue these attempts to define an 'after' postmodernism stand-in for an inability to succeed advanced capitalism, producing a distinct way of connecting postmodern aesthetics and contemporary American culture. Postmodern aesthetics continue to provide ways of depicting a complex reality, establishing an overlooked stage of postmodernism considered here through forms of repetition, which establish a twenty-first century postmodern continuum.

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Introduction

This thesis presents a postmodern continuum within American fiction, where postmodernism is altered and repeated rather than succeeded. An ability to position an 'after' is counter to the fundamental practices of postmodernism, which challenges progress, the possibility of radical transformation, and the ability to create the 'new.' Yet, postmodernism must in some way account for alterations within American culture that distinguish particular historical moments from one another, even if these changes are not considered to be epochal transformations. After the height of postmodernism in the eighties, the end of the Cold War, and the global expansion of capitalism, postmodernism has increasingly been questioned as a viable way of understanding contemporary America. This was further compounded by major incidents – the birth of social media, the September 11th attacks and the 2008 financial crash – that have been broadly used to argue for a new era of twenty-first century culture, which breaks from postmodernism. Yet, instead of this proving to be the demise of postmodernism, this period stretching from the late eighties to the twenty-first century demarcates both a shift within and a continuation of American postmodernism. It is no longer simply a stylised set of avant-garde artistic techniques, nor is it only an expression of eighties American culture. Postmodernism has both morphed with these shifts in culture, and been mobilised in different ways within American fiction to respond to this changing environment. Francis Fukuyama's (1992) declaration of the end of history may now seem premature when considered as a measure of social change, but it continues to articulate the limits of epochal change that shapes the contemporary moment. An analysis of the repetitions of postmodernism provides a way of interrogating how both American culture and artistic practices have recalibrated uses of postmodernism, shedding light upon contemporary America's relation to it.

The thesis analyses an array of American novels influenced by postmodernism, and published since the destabilisation of Soviet communism in the late eighties, stretching into the second decade of the twenty-first century. Instead of providing further distinctions from postmodernism, this selection of texts is used to present shifts within a postmodern continuum that contribute towards a re-evaluation of its contemporary

relevance. The continuum it presents suggests inferred points of convergence between late twentieth and twenty-first century American writing, and is used to shed new light upon both the contemporary relevance and continued legacy of postmodernism. These discrete repetitions of postmodernism reflect the conflicting ways postmodernism persists within the contemporary moment. This approach accounts for the cultural integration of postmodernism alongside the ways its experimental and extreme literary style is used to critically depict the complexities of contemporary society. The repetition of postmodernism to express twenty-first century American cultural concerns suggests a particular set of ways in which postmodernism endures in the present. Failure is central to this postmodern continuum, where the proclamations of its end – by theorists and literary authors alike – foregrounds the ways postmodernism is in fact continued and altered through these repetitions.

The selection of texts analysed in this thesis exemplify the extremity and experimentalism of postmodern aesthetics. My reading of contemporary American culture through postmodernism situates canonical postmodern novels alongside more critically and commercially ignored twenty-first century texts. This apparently disparate selection of novels offers a broad cross-section of ways that contemporary American writing and culture continue to adopt features of postmodernism. To exclusively focus upon mainstream novels reduces cultural diversity to popular culture, simplifying the contradictions and points of tension a broader textual analysis makes possible. Comparably, to focus exclusively upon underground works potentially overlooks central features that define and shape a contemporary American cultural mindset within mainstream writing. This combination of mainstream and more critically overlooked texts, stretching from the late eighties to the second decade of the twenty-first century, adopted here exemplifies the complexities and contradictions of postmodernism's contemporary persistence.

By considering the cultural legacy of Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, I suggest these novels can, somewhat counter-intuitively, be considered part of twenty-first century American culture. To read these texts as contemporary establishes a connection between canonical postmodern texts and present day America. The novels' concerns

with an unsurpassable capitalist culture – particularly the ways this manifests in a contemporary American imagination and political culture shaped by violence – demonstrates the ways postmodernism has been repeated and culturally integrated. The apparent contentions of arguing for a persistent postmodern continuum infer postmodernism is no longer contemporary, distinguishing repetitions of postmodernism from mainstream twenty-first century American fiction. Yet, the centrality of postmodern aesthetics to Amanda Filipacchi's *Love Creeps*, Zané Sachs' *Sadie: The Sadist*, Dennis Cooper's *God Jr.* and *Zac's Control Panel*, Tao Lin's *Taipei*, and Alexandra Kleeman's *You Too Can Have A Body Like Mine* suggest this distinction is not as clear-cut as it might seem. To consider these latter texts as markers of contemporary American culture may at first appear counter-intuitive, particularly when their connection to postmodernism contradicts theories and aesthetics of succession. Nevertheless, their reframing of contemporary American capitalist culture presents a continued ability to critically reflect upon the absence of alternatives to advanced capitalism through repetitions and the remoulding of postmodern aesthetics.

These texts specifically exemplify the extremity and experimentalism of postmodern aesthetics that continues to confront the chaotic realism of the contemporary American moment. In some instances, they anticipate the contemporary cultural mindset through their depiction of anxieties that shape twenty-first century American society. In others, they illustrate how postmodern aesthetics continue to provide vital means of confronting the combined legacy of postmodernism and advanced capitalism, represented by contemporary American writing. Together, these texts offer a means of recognising smaller historical shifts within a more sustained cultural experience of advanced capitalism, mapping these shifts within rather than from a postmodern advanced capitalist American culture. This selection of works stages a counter-intuitive reconsideration of the value of blank fictional aesthetics within a twenty-first century context. Instead of viewing blank fiction as an exclusively twentieth century sub-set of postmodern aesthetics, this thesis reflects upon how blank fictional tropes continue to resonate with contemporary American culture. The cynicism, hopelessness, commodification, superficiality and extremity blank fiction articulates in response to capitalism's totalising dominance remain central features of the

contemporary moment, illustrated by the selection of texts included in this thesis. These American-born authors offer a distinctly American perception of post-Cold War globalisation. They confront how the geographical expansion of an advanced capitalism without alternative shapes an American cultural experience, illustrating how postmodern aesthetics continue to be able to critically depict the contradictions and complexities of this experience.

I argue these contemporary repetitions of postmodernism are integral to understanding its continued relevance today. This approach confronts the marginalisation of postmodernism in twenty-first century thought, presented by American literary scholarship. The study's original contribution to knowledge is produced by bridging this gap between the closing decades of the twentieth century and the present. An analysis of these repetitions foregrounds a continuum of postmodernism that scholarship frequently seeks to surpass or dismiss, rather than extend into the contemporary moment. These recurring attempts to overcome postmodernism, particularly because they have yet to produce a new epoch distinct from it, infer an extension that reshapes rather than succeeds postmodernism. It is important not to reduce the present moment to a previous incarnation of postmodernism that does not account for these cultural shifts, which is central to scholarly attempts to surpass it. However, it is also important not to prematurely delineate an 'after,' minimising the need to consider how postmodernism's features continue to shape twenty-first century American culture. Instead of only looking forwards to an era after postmodernism that currently lacks consensus, this thesis looks back to consider how postmodernism continues today. It does so not assimilate the present into past frameworks, but considers the range of repetitions collectively, assessing how this recalibrates a contemporary perception of postmodernism's contemporary relevance.

Theories of succession draw upon a range of cultural events as evidence of postmodernism's inability to critically confront the contemporary moment. This collective desire to articulate a succession from postmodernism is also partly reflected in mainstream American writing, which has largely moved away from the overt use of postmodern aesthetics to depict twenty-first century America. The September 11th terrorist attacks have seemingly vindicated the New Sincerity movement's critique of

postmodern irony, prioritising emotions over apathy, as exemplified in texts like Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005). This position is apparently strengthened by metamodernism's use of feeling as a way of distinguishing the present moment from postmodernism, illustrated through a broad range of texts, including a reading of Tao Lin's writing as post-ironic.[1] A range of other events – from the arrival of the Anthropocene to the 2008 financial crash – suggest a distinctly different relation to capitalism and instability that seemingly make postmodernism's rejection of grand narratives and radical transformation redundant. Perhaps most notably, the rise of digital technology has captured the imagination of theories attempting to articulate a post-postmodern world driven by speed (hypermodernism), a digital recalibration of subjectivity (posthumanism), and a succession from both humanist and even capitalism structures (accelerationism). These theoretical and cultural features present a contemporary reliance upon postmodernism as nostalgic, looking back to a late twentieth century culture that can no longer account for twenty-first century society. Yet, when probed more closely, these theories demonstrate a number of important connections between postmodernism and the contemporary moment.

Collectively, these theories of succession prioritise change at the expense of fully acknowledging the features of postmodernism that persist within these cultural shifts. The most overt continuing feature is the post-Cold War presence of advanced capitalism, which has been altered but not succeeded. Theories of succession could be read as an unconscious attempt to confront this impasse, transposing a desire to succeed capitalism onto a relatively more achievable theoretical succession of postmodernism. Their inability to provide a consensus epochal shift from postmodernism, and upon what grounds, suggests a complex and awkward relation to succession. In this respect, either contemporary American culture remains postmodern, or at very least has internalised the logic of a postmodern cynicism towards grand narratives. Like the shift from modernism to postmodernism, the transition between

[1] Lee Konstantinou, 'Four Faces of Postirony', in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism*, ed. by Robin Van Den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), pp. 87-102, (pp. 88, 98).

cultural mindsets is not clear cut, meaning the succession of postmodernism is not necessarily impossible. However, a transition from postmodernism might only be given a cohesive narrative with hindsight, implying this coherent point of departure from postmodernism has not yet been reached.

Instead of representing the slow demise of postmodernism in a post-postmodern era, the works discussed here emphasise the ways postmodernism has shifted in twenty-first century American culture. Rather than considering the waning popularity of postmodernism as evidence of its succession, this thesis interrogates the changing cultural function of postmodern aesthetics. In their emphasis upon surpassing postmodernism, these theories of succession at times seem quick to trivialise and simply postmodernism in order to surpass it. This means the various theories of succession address postmodernism exclusively through this lens of succession, rather than as a set of critical and aesthetic practices that are repeated in the contemporary moment. By posing a seemingly counter-intuitive thought experiment – considering what it means to view contemporary America as postmodern – the complexities and contradictions of postmodernism's legacy can be confronted. Subsequently, this thesis offers a counter-balance to the various theories of succession, considering how postmodernism persists in a way that supplements the emphasis they collectively place upon cultural change.

If postmodernism has not been succeeded, its new phase repeats its features within a distinct historical moment, exemplified by the selection of American texts included here. The global expansion of capitalism after the Cold War produced an enclosed socio-political framework that seemingly cannot be radically transformed, intensifying rather than surpassing the postmodern experience. This lends the appearance of a certain prescience to *American Psycho*, *Empire of the Senseless* and *Fight Club*, each of which depict an inescapable capitalist society of consumption, excess, exploitation and failed revolutionary violence. Although the cultural specifics of the worlds they depict have changed, I argue this is only superficially so. Instead, I claim these texts continue to express anxieties and frustrations of an existence defined primarily by advanced capitalist economics. These novels mark the beginning of a

shifting relation to both postmodernism and advanced capitalism within American society, which extends into twenty-first century culture and writing.

The insights and literary tropes of postmodernism reappear in post-millennial texts, making these repetitions indicative of the complexity of postmodernism's twenty-first century incarnations. In some instances, these account for cultural shifts, as in *Love Creeps* and *Sadie: The Sadist*, where the transgressive features of postmodernism are reapplied to contemporary cultural concerns. Yet, in other instances, such as *God Jr.* and *Zac's Control Panel*, the failure to coherently surpass postmodernism through digital technology counter-intuitively reproduces postmodernism in derivative and stylistically conservative ways. *Taipei* and *You Too Can Have A Body Like Mine* politicise apparently nostalgic repetitions of postmodernism, dramatising postmodernism's connection to contemporary American society. Postmodernism is stylistically central to the works' expressions of a complex reality that is perpetuated under post-Cold War capitalism, rather than succeeded in twenty-first century culture.

This project situates canonical postmodern novels alongside contemporary works by postmodern authors, and contemporary works with clear postmodern influences. In doing so it offers a reassessment of postmodernism's contemporary cultural currency through its repetitions, foregrounding changes within rather than radical epochal succession from postmodernism. This process of reading forward and also looking back to locate the insights of postmodernism within the present interrogates how and to what extent these repetitions occur both culturally and within literature. It emphasises postmodernism's fluidity, specifically its ability to shape and be shaped by culture, contributing to studies on postmodernism's legacy by explicitly connecting twenty-first century American novels to late twentieth century writing.

Postmodernism's ambiguity is central to the difficulties of both defining and surpassing it. Brian McHale describes postmodernism as a stylistic movement that chronologically comes 'after the *modernist movement*,' but which is 'parasitic on earlier modes,' complicating a clear sense of historical sequence and succession.[2] Linda Hutcheon

[2] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London & New York: Routledge, 1987), p. 5; Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 24.

similarly describes a parasitic nature to postmodernism's literary critique, producing a complicity that 'at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century western world.'[3] In both instances, postmodernism's ambiguity refuses to offer coherent forms of construction that would inevitably result in its succession. This is furthered by John Barth's paradoxical pronouncement of an exhaustion or 'used-upness' of postmodern literary tropes that can also be 'deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work.'[4] Here, even postmodernism's fatigue becomes a feature of its perpetual stylistic reinvention, making its malleable ability to express complexity integral to its continued life.

This ambiguity continues in Fredric Jameson's description of postmodernism 'not as a style but rather as a cultural dominant,' where postmodernism becomes an unchosen cultural style that expresses the 'cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism.'[5] It is not only Jameson's account of postmodernism as a style and cultural expression, but also its complicity with the capitalist system it critiques, that makes postmodernism a defining feature of eighties American culture. Postmodernism's integration within an inescapable capitalist framework indicates shifts in both its function and its cultural currency. Contemporary society is distinct from the Cold War America Jameson described, but the inability to succeed the capitalist framework he aligned with postmodernism is not. It is therefore necessary to consider how postmodernism's alignment with a globally expanding capitalism persists and is transformed. It is also important to consider how American fiction continues to express this entwinement through repetitions of postmodern styles that reflect the complexities of this claustrophobic experience.

Various debates continue in terms of how best to define the contemporary moment's relation to postmodernism. Jeffrey Nealon presents the shift from late

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[3] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Second Edition (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 11.
[4] John Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion', in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 62-76, (p. 64); John Barth, 'The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernism Fiction', in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 193-206, (p. 205).
[5] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1992), pp. 4, 46.

capitalism Jameson describes to an intensified global capitalism as indicative of the transition into post-postmodernism. Although he acknowledges this as 'an intensification and mutation within postmodernism' rather than an outright epochal transition, it becomes a marker of when postmodernism has 'become something recognizably different in its contours and workings.'[6] His illustration of how postmodernism has persisted in an altered fashion resonates with the repetitions of postmodernism outlined here. Yet, Nealon differentiates the intensified 'legacy' of postmodernism from its cultural incarnation in the eighties and nineties, inferring a succession from rather than a historical relocation of postmodernism.[7] This nuanced distinction is significant because it differentiates the perceived exhaustion of earlier forms of postmodernism from a 'capitalism [that] seems nowhere near the point of its exhaustion.'[8] The continued and expanding dominance of capitalism differentiates post-postmodernism from postmodernism for Nealon, offering an ambiguous form of succession. Nealon suggests postmodernism's continued vitality arises from a mutation within it, but uses this as justification for perpetuating its ambiguity by defining this period as 'after' postmodernism. Instead, these alterations of postmodernism retain a more overt connection to the continuation of this epoch when considered through repetition, emphasising the shift within, rather than succession from, postmodernism.

The stylistic features of postmodernism provide a further way its legacy is repeated and altered in contemporary American culture, a legacy that is made more apparent when considered through repetition. While acknowledging an enduring but in some ways ambiguous legacy, John McGowan claims that 'postmodernism might be 'periodized' as lasting from 1968 to 1989.'[9] The collapse of soviet communism undoubtedly marks a cultural turning point that impacts postmodernism, specifically in light of the connection Jameson draws between postmodernism and consumer capitalism. Yet, perhaps more intriguingly, McGowan aligns postmodernism's style of

[6] Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Just-In-Time Capitalism* (California: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. ix.
[7] Ibid., p. 11.
[8] Ibid., p. 15.
[9] John McGowan, 'They Might Have Been Giants', in *Supplanting The Postmodern*, ed. by David Redrum and Nicholas Stavris (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 63-73, (p. 70).

'thinking big' with more contemporary conservative thinkers.[10] This passing connection between postmodernism and the political right has intensified and altered in twenty-first century American politics in ways McGowan certainly could not anticipate in 2007. In some ways, this was repeated through the Republican primaries and subsequent election of Donald Trump in 2016, who Matthew McManus describes as the first 'post-modern conservative President.'[11] Angela Nagle also describes a 'transgression and irreverence for its own sake' of Donald Trump and Milo Yiannopoulos that resonates with postmodernism's nihilism, provocation and perceived radicalism within contemporary American politics.[12] This is reinforced by the hyper-masculine violence of *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* she also connects to the American alt-right, particularly its development in online forums like 4chan.[13] Furthermore, Matthew D'Ancona compares the political impact of 2016, which he calls the 'Post-Truth' era, to the events that mark the definitive period of McGowan's postmodernism: the revolutionary sentiments of 1968 and the collapse of Soviet communism in 1989.[14] The contemporary American political landscape has, in various ways, integrated features of postmodernism, suggesting it has been repeated and altered but not succeeded. Therefore, this cultural moment exemplifies the ways features of postmodernism have reappeared in a range of unexpected ways in the contemporary moment, emphasising its continued relevance.

The attempts to define an 'after' postmodernism that lack overall consensus paradoxically perpetuate postmodernism's cynicism towards grand narratives. Jean-François Lyotard describes postmodernism's 'incredulity toward metanarratives,' an insight that is methodologically repeated by this inability to produce a definitive narrative of this period following postmodernism's height.[15] Instead of coherent succession, there

[10] Ibid.
[11] Matthew McManus, 'What is the Post-Modern Epoch?', in *What is Post-Modern Conservatism: Essays on Our Hugely Tremendous Times*, ed. by Matthew McManus (Winchester & Washington: Zero Books, 2020), pp. 13-19, (p. 16).
[12] Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Winchester & Washington: Zero, 2017), p. 67.
[13] Ibid., p. 29.
[14] Matthew D'Ancona, *Post Truth: The New Era on Truth and How to Fight Back* (London: Ebury Press, 2017), p. 7.
[15] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), p. xxiv.

remains a plurality of definitions of a period 'after' postmodernism, including post-postmodernism, metamodernism, remodernism, hypermodernism, automodernism, altermodernism, digimodernism, and a range of other more distant 'isms,' such as performatism, posthumanism, accelerationism, and renewalism. Rather than clarifying what comes after the proclaimed but equivocal end of postmodernism, collectively, this range of definitions perpetuate the ambiguity of postmodernism in different ways. In many ways, Jean Baudrillard's claim that 'The whole problem of speaking about the end (particularly the end of history) is that you have to speak of what lies beyond the end' is repeated in the contemporary moment through this desire for succession.[16] This problem is accounted for within postmodernism, where its scepticism towards progress and radical transformation repeats features of modernism's experimental aesthetic. Yet, postmodernism repeats modernism with an increased cynicism towards autonomy through the emphasis it places upon power, altering its insights while retaining its aesthetics. The point of distinction from the post-postmodernisms is that their fragmented desire for succession reinforces postmodernism's methodology of scepticism. Collectively, they articulate a desire for succession that reinstates postmodernism's cynicism towards the construction of new grand narratives, rather than producing one that might challenge the current postmodern cultural epoch. Their proclamations – to varying degrees – of the end of postmodernism have produced a range of definitions of what comes next, but in many ways have extended and repeated rather than succeeded the insights of postmodernism.

If this period can be defined collectively, it is perhaps best done via Mary Holland's suggestion that the cultural period 'after' postmodernism produces 'an intellectual climate of hyperperiodization.'[17] For Holland, 'This extensive overlapping points to the curious way in which this sudden burst of "after postmodernism" criticism both presses forward and stalls out, as additions to the critical conversation follow upon each other's heels so closely as to have insufficient time to take account of each other.'[18] This failure to adequately define a period that succeeds postmodernism

[16] Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. by Chris Turner (Oxford: Polity Press, 1994), p. 110.
[17] Mary K. Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language & Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (New York & London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 1.
[18] Ibid., p. 13.

produces what Holland describes as 'not the end of postmodernism, but its belated success,' inferring an intensification of rather than succession from its insights.[19] To consider the repetitions of postmodernism accounts for this contemporary issue, but this thesis is less interested in what Holland calls 'a new faith in language' or a 'return to humanism' in this twenty-first century American context.[20] Instead, repetitions of postmodernism emphasise its extreme and experimental aspects, specifically how these continue to be mobilised in fiction to confront the limits of cultural and capitalist succession.

To repeat postmodernism in a literary context confronts the complex issue of cultural succession directly, interrogating the limits of this transformation rather than offering a further conceptualisation of an 'after.' The rationale for this methodology derives from Slavoj Žižek's description of cultural deadlocks, which he prioritises over the premature proposition of alternative structures:

> true courage is not to imagine an alternative, but to accept the consequences of the fact that there is no clearly discernible alternative. The dream of an alternative is a sign of theoretical cowardice: it functions as a fetish that prevents us thinking to the end of the deadlock of our predicament.[21]

Although Žižek describes this predicament of how to respond to the twenty-first century refugee crisis, his comments might usefully be applied to a contemporary understanding of postmodernism. In this context, the continued proliferation of conceptual successions from postmodernism fail to fully account for the consequences of postmodernism, and the limits it places upon succession. Even approaches that account for its complex legacy, such as post-postmodernism and metamodernism, minimise this repetition of postmodernism in favour of a process of succession from it. To consider repetitions of postmodernism accounts for shifts in how it is perceived and mobilised, but without conceptualising an 'after' that might obscure its continuation. This repeated emphasis upon postmodernism accounts for a changing cultural relation to postmodernism and an

[19] Ibid., p. 17.
[20] Ibid., pp. 1, 6.
[21] Slavoj Žižek, *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbours* (Milton Keynes: Allen Lane, 2016), p.108.

intensification of advanced capitalism, making it comparable to Nealon's post-postmodernism. Here, the legacy of postmodernism is considered part of, rather than distinct from, this intensification. Postmodernism continues to provide a vocabulary to articulate the complexities of contemporary culture, giving aspects of its repetition a vitality that remains critically useful. In addition, other features used to argue a succession from postmodernism also contribute towards this intensity through their culturally integrated repetition. To consider the repetition of postmodernism is to consider the process of intensification underway since the late eighties in American culture, but without partially alleviating this intensity through definitions of an 'after' postmodernism, which produce momentary release from this claustrophobia.

Digital technology provides one of the most overt features used to define a succession from a largely pre-digital postmodernism. The descriptions of this succession vary in emphasis, but broadly agree that digital technology has radically transformed contemporary culture in ways that make postmodernism seem dated. Yet, even these proclamations necessarily incorporate, extend and even repeat postmodernism. Alan Kirby presents digimodernism as 'the logical effect of postmodernism, suggesting a modulated continuity more than a rupture.'[22] In this respect, it cannot be coherently disentangled from the postmodern epoch Kirby attempts to succeed. This is exemplified by the 'new form of textuality' that Kirby argues is produced by digital technology, which retains a strong connection to the hypertextuality that Robert Coover describes.[23] Comparably, Gilles Lipovetsky positions hypermodernism as a successor to postmodernism, produced by the increased speed of capitalism and digital technology. He describes an acceleration of movement, where 'there is no longer any choice or alternative other than that of constantly developing,' generating 'insecurity, the loss of fixed guide-lines, the disappearance of secular utopias, and an individualistic disintegration of the social bond.'[24] This is comparable to

[22] Alan Kirby, '*from* Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure our Culture', in *Supplanting The Postmodern*, ed. by David Redrum and Nicholas Stavris (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 273-304, (p. 274).
[23] Ibid., p. 276; Coover, Robert, 'The End of Books', *The New York Times*, 21st June 1992 <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/09/27/specials/coover-end.html?> [accessed 3rd August 2020].
[24] Gilles Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*, trans. by Andrew Brown (Cambridge & Malden: Polity, 2005), pp. 34, 64.

Cooper's claims to succeed postmodernism through digital technology, exemplified in *Zac's Control Panel*, but where he nonetheless repeats a number of its features. Lipovetsky's description of hypermodernity suggests a cultural integration of rather than succession from postmodernism, reproducing it in its shifting focus from the past towards the future in a way that downplays this continued connection. In both instances, postmodernism is reduced to its historical dimension in order to succeed it. However, postmodernism's insights are repeated in these attempts to succeed it, retaining a stronger connection to the contemporary than either Kirby or Lipovetsky acknowledge.

Likewise, posthumanism provides a more explicit extension of postmodernism, but continues to overstate this process of succession through digital advancements. Rosi Braidotti presents posthumanism as a further successor of postmodernism, described as the 'heirs of Western post-modernity,' whose cultural experience is redefined by digital technology.[25] This produces what Braidotti calls an exhaustion that can 'become affirmative,' recalibrating a feature of the postmodern experience towards a more hopeful description of posthumanism.[26] Yet, posthumanism's 'process of becoming, without referring to one single normative model of subjectivity, let alone a universal one' seemingly repeats postmodernism's insights in a more optimistic way within a digitised and ecologically aware context.[27] While posthumanism integrates the insights of postmodernism into its framework, specifically Deleuzian forms of fragmentation and becoming, it fails to fully account for how this succession has taken place empirically through close readings of specific examples. Instead, it provides a hope of succession that exemplifies the trend to define an 'after' postmodernism. In doing so, posthumanism prioritises the features that have moved away from previous incarnations of postmodernism, rather than considering how its features are repeated. In each instance, digital culture informs an optimistic succession from postmodernism by reducing its complexity, rather than considering how postmodernism is repeated within a digitised contemporary context.

[25] Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge & Medford: Polity, 2019), p. 15.
[26] Ibid., p. 18.
[27] Ibid., p. 136.

Political theory has similarly positioned itself against postmodernism, while internalising its cynicism towards radical transformation. Mark Fisher describes a post-Cold War climate defined by a 'widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to even *imagine* a coherent alternative to it.'[28] For Fisher, this experience of capitalist realism is distinct from postmodernism, primarily by a process of intensification that produces a 'deeper, far more pervasive, sense of exhaustion.'[29] Yet, this centralisation of capitalism as the dominant grand narrative strengthens rather than diminishes postmodernism's cynicism towards radical transformation. The dominance of capitalism resonates through many of the literary and theoretical works associated with postmodernism, from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* to Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. In this respect, capitalist realism becomes the realisation of a postmodern cynicism towards the construction of further grand narratives, now inhibited by an advanced capitalism that seemingly cannot be radically transformed. This produces an acceleration of postmodern principles, comparable to the ways digital culture alters postmodernism; an alteration that is best considered as a mutated repetition rather than succession of postmodernism.

When acceleration is confronted within political theory, this is commonly distinguished from postmodernism. Both the left and right political factions of accelerationism reject postmodernism for a different set of reasons. For the left, this is because it inhibits the transition into post-capitalism. Paul Mason asserts that digital technology accelerates the progression from the existing capitalist framework, claiming that 'Once capitalism can no longer adapt to technological change, postcapitalism becomes necessary.'[30] This process is implicitly partly inhibited by postmodernism, which he claims has produced 'a slave ideology for the neoliberal system,' cynically undermining the construction of grand narratives that might produce alternatives to advanced capitalism.[31] Mason's optimism is reiterated by Alex Williams and Nick

[28] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester & Washington: Zero Books, 2009), p. 2.
[29] Ibid., p. 7.
[30] Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (Milton Keynes: Allen Lane, 2015), p. xiii.
[31] Paul Mason, *Clear Bright Future: A Radical Defence of the Human Being* (Milton Keynes: Allen Lane, 2019), p. 174.

Srnicek, who imagine a post-capitalist future that succeeds 'the tired residue of postmodernity.'[32] Like Mason, they problematise postmodernism's cynical view of power structures, presenting a need to 'refurbish mastery in a newly complex guise' distinct from postmodernism's depiction of 'mastery as proto-fascistic or authority as innately illegitimate.'[33] Yet, these valiant attempts to conceptualise a beyond both capitalism and postmodernism prioritise succession, rather than confronting the deadlock preventing this transition. Mason's investment in a digital future fails to critically confront the ways digital technology reinforces existing power structures, echoed by Williams and Srnicek's desire to 'accelerate the process of technological evolution.'[34] Their desire to succeed both capitalism and postmodernism illustrates a shift in sentiment, but without producing a fundamentally different experience where radical transformation has become possible. Consequently, their depictions of accelerationism repeat and internalise the logic of postmodernism, exemplified by their inability to construct alternatives beyond digitally influenced forms of conceptual abstraction.

Where cynicism is incorporated into accelerationism, this is primarily within the more troubling fatalism of a rightist configuration. Nick Land describes postmodernism as 'an epoch of undead power,' which has been exhausted but persists, and which he seeks to surpass through accelerationism.[35] For Land, postmodernism is problematic because it represents the 'final dream of mankind,' otherwise described as 'quaintly humanist.'[36] It is less a desire to succeed capitalism, and more postmodernism's inability to fully account for the non-human aspects of ecology and digital technology that shapes Land's description of succession. His accelerationism celebrates Deleuzo-Guattarian deterritorialisation, of increased fragmentation at all costs, without pursuing a break from capitalism. Instead, 'As you speed up the industrialization simulation you see it converge with slow-motion butchery,' where 'The full labour-market cycle blurs into a

[32] Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, '#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics', in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. by Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), pp. 347-362, (p. 361).
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid., p. 356.
[35] Nick Land, 'Cybergothic', in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*, ed. by Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth & New York: Urbanomic, 2019), pp. 345-374, (p. 351).
[36] Ibid., p. 350; Nick Land, 'Meltdown', in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*, ed. by Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth & New York: Urbanomic, 2019), pp. 441-459, (p. 453).

meat-grinder.'[37] This echoes the nihilism of Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, but without the implied critical reflection upon capitalism's brutality found in Ellis' novel.

Land claims postmodernism is succeeded through a fatalistic process of intensification, stripping away the last remnants of ethics and humanism it abstracted. He adds a grim celebratory twist to Fisher's capitalist realism – claiming capitalism 'will always, inevitably, be the latest thing' – producing a dystopian alternative future to Braidotti, Mason, Williams and Srnicek.[38] However, his intensification of postmodernism and capitalism's inhumanity produces a Deleuzo-Guattarian deterritorialisation that is ultimately reterritorialised, and incorporated into a society still driven by human actions, interactions and culture. Instead of succeeding postmodernism, Land's accelerationism resonates with the alt-right's mobilisation of an extreme and hyper-violent postmodern world view connected to *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*.[39] Accelerationism is therefore entwined with and repeated alongside postmodernism rather than succeeding it, partly informing a troubling new era of right wing politics connected to the aesthetics of postmodernism.

The 2008 financial crash represents the culmination of the combined acceleration of postmodernism and capitalism. Christian Marazzi describes it as 'the crisis of crises,' presenting it as the culmination of capitalist deregulation since the implementation of Reaganomics in eighties America.[40] Yet, it failed to produce a radical transformation of either the financial sector specifically or the structure of advanced capitalism, despite fundamentally discrediting it. As Howard Davies claims, 'no clear alternative view of the role of finance has emerged' from this crisis, reinforcing and intensifying the absence of (alternative) grand narratives professed by postmodernism, extended by Fisher, and internalised within contemporary society.[41] This event, oddly, combines accelerationism

[37] Nick Land, 'No Future', in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*, ed. by Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth & New York: Urbanomic, 2019), pp. 391-399 (p.396).
[38] Nick Land, 'Critique of Transcendental Miserablism', in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*, ed. by Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth & New York: Urbanomic, 2019), pp. 623-627, (p. 625).
[39] Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, p. 28-30.
[40] Christian Marazzi, *The Violence of Financial Capitalism*, trans. by Kristina Lebedeva and Jason Francis Mc Gimsey (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), p. 10.
[41] Howard Davies, *Can Financial Markets be Controlled?* (Cambridge & Malden: Polity, 2015), p. 76.

with a continuation of postmodernism: taking capitalism to an extremity that destabilises it, while remaining unable to imagine a means of succeeding or radically transforming it.

The 2008 financial crash reinforces postmodernism's contemporary relevance, while also illustrating how its cultural presence has altered. If 'a new era began' after the fall of the Soviet Union, as Thomas Piketty claims, it is an era that continues today in both American culture and postmodern-inspired fiction.[42] It is central to the despair of late twentieth century novels like *American Psycho*, *Empire of the Senseless* and *Fight Club*, but also contemporary texts such as *Love Creeps*, *Sadie: The Sadist*, *Taipei* and *You Too Can Have A Body Like Mine*. Capitalist excess continues, but in an altered way that intensifies the perpetual suffering and boredom of the increasing number of people exploited by it in a post-2008 climate. The financial crash therefore becomes little more than a reminder of the repetitions of postmodernism within post-millennial American culture, extended and intensified in the political climate of the 2010s.

This continued relevance is reinforced through the revival and reinterpretation of other features of postmodernism dismissed as being exhausted, specifically transgressive excess. Steven Shaviro calls transgressive art 'entirely normative' rather than subversive, due to an aesthetics of excess that resonates with advanced capitalism.[43] Yet, this shortcoming is depicted as early as *American Psycho*, and repeated in novels like *Love Creeps* through self-reflexive uses of these tropes. This suggests more diverse possibilities through the repetition of postmodern aesthetics that attempt to describe the contemporary moment. Similarly, in response to this post-2008 climate, *Sadie: The Sadist* repeats and alters this postmodern aesthetic of extremity and excess. The novel incorporates reflections upon waste and ecological limitations that accounts for Elaine Graham-Leigh's claim it is 'counterproductive for us to prescribe what a different society after capitalism might look like' when considering such issues.[44] Again, this provides a return to and repetition of a postmodern world view that reinforces its cultural relevance, alongside its recurrence within American fiction. In its continual

[42] Thomas Piketty, *Chronicles: On Our Troubled Times*, trans. by Seth Ackerman (Milton Keynes: Viking, 2016), p. 2.
[43] Steven Shaviro, *No Speed Limit: Three Essays on Accelerationism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p.31.
[44] Elaine Graham-Leigh, *A Diet of Austerity: Class, Food and Climate Change* (Winchester & Washington: Zero Books, 2015), p. 190.

confrontation of the limits of radical transformation, contemporary American society repeats the insights of postmodernism, both cultural and literary, evidencing its continued currency in a range of complex and unexpected ways.

In this thesis, postmodernism is defined as a politicised aesthetic that reflects the tensions of contemporary American culture. It depicts a complex reality integral to the contemporary moment, shaped by the commodification of rebellion, the absence of radical transformation, intensified forms of fragmentation, hopelessness, and a contradictory relation to notions of succession. The contradictions of postmodernism are therefore central to this definition: representing a vital mode of critique in some instances, and an internalised set of cultural conventions in others. Its experimental style is integral to this complexity, using depictions of extremity to convey and confront the mechanisms of advanced capitalism. The novels use postmodernism as a textual means of dramatising the frustrations of an absence of radical transformation within post-Cold War America. They stage reflections upon the limits of capitalist succession through postmodernism, which stylistically conveys a cultural absence of succession through a set of experimental literary tropes used to reflect the mechanisms of contemporary society. The terms postmodern and postmodernism are used interchangeably to communicate this connection between a cultural epoch and the literary style used to depict it, foregrounding the ways its insights and anxieties have been integrated into contemporary American culture. Postmodernism's aesthetics stage the complex reality of a capitalist framework that resists radical transformation and commodifies dissent, embracing contradiction an exemplary way of demonstrating contemporary frustrations and anxieties.

This politicised definition of postmodernism extends from Jameson's description of its ability to navigate late capitalist society. For Jameson, a politicised postmodern aesthetic 'will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as spatial scale.'[45] This makes it both a symptomatic product of the capitalist society of eighties America, and also a means of confronting and better understanding how to navigate this experience. For Jameson,

[45] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 54.

postmodernism provides a set of literary techniques that internalises, reflects and at times subverts these cultural mechanisms of capitalism. Yet, Jameson's relation to both postmodernism and capitalism need to be reconsidered in light of a new historical moment that follows the collapse of Soviet communism. This advancement of globalised capitalism represents a recognisable shift in postmodern American culture that must be accounted for, specifically in terms of the ways in which novels mobilise and respond to this changing postmodern culture. In a culture where postmodernism is no longer perceived to be relevant, it necessarily alters the way postmodernism is socially perceived and integrated, and how this is depicted within contemporary fiction.

This is central to my thesis' definition of postmodernism, which considers how a changing historical relation to postmodernism impacts the ways it is textually depicted. By interrogating repetitions and alterations of postmodernism, textual depictions of postmodernism can be used to better understand its relation to contemporary American society, updating the cognitive mapping Jameson undertook in the eighties. This post-eighties relation to postmodernism presents a shift that Nealon suggests is 'hard to understand today as anything other than an intensified version of yesterday.'[46] Yet, instead of describing this shift as post-postmodern, here it is presented as repetitions of postmodernism. This is done to explicitly emphasise the continuation of a postmodern cultural epoch, while also accounting for the varied ways its tropes are mobilised to depict a changing relation to capitalism in American fiction. Postmodernism may no longer be a vanguard style, but this simply obscures rather than succeeds a persistent postmodern continuum. A reappraisal of postmodernism is required, reflecting upon its contemporary relevance to better navigate this shifting relation to advanced capitalism.

The term 'advanced capitalism' is used in this thesis to convey a post-Cold War expansion that challenges the possibility of succeeding it. Where late capitalism makes sense within an eighties American culture where alternatives still existed, a different term is now required. The term 'late capitalism' implies this socio-political system is nearing its end, inferring a radical transformation on the immediate horizon. However, the collapse of alternative socio-political frameworks alters the possibility of this end in a cultural mindset, which must be accounted for in the terminology used to describe it.

[46] Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism*, p. 8.

Instead of Nealon's shift from late to 'just-in-time' capitalism, the term advanced capitalism is used to convey a development of capitalism rather than a sense of speed.[47] The term advanced capitalism is also favoured over globalised capitalism, despite its geographical expansion being central to this advancement. Contemporary American politics has seen a backlash against the globalised features of advanced capitalism, combined with conservative permutations of postmodernism, exemplified by Trump, which make it an inadequate term for describing this trajectory.[48] Advanced capitalism conveys the persistence and continuation of a developed form of capitalism, one which acknowledges a post-Cold War shift that has made it more culturally entrenched. This definition of advanced capitalism is closest to Fisher's definition of capitalist realism, but without being explicitly constructed in contrast to postmodernism, inferring a departure at odds with these depictions of postmodern repetitions.

The term 'advanced capitalism' was chosen instead of 'neoliberalism' to clearly demarcate a post-Cold War cultural moment that informs a shift within the use of postmodern aesthetics. Both neoliberalism and advanced capitalism articulate a particular set of mechanisms within capitalism where privatisation, economic rationalisation, and free market deregulation are privileged socio-economic values. This particular political outlook informs the way capitalism is conceived and depicted in American fiction. However, to refer to neoliberalism rather than advanced capitalism potentially obscures the significance of this shift within American capitalist culture. The prevalence of neoliberal politics, particularly since the seventies, requires more precise historical location, which the term advanced capitalism provides. This precision is more significant when articulating the at times nuanced shifts within postmodern aesthetics, with the intention of avoiding ahistorical and abstracted reflections upon postmodernism and capitalism.

By using the term advanced capitalism, the significance of the end of the Cold War is foregrounded rather than absorbed into a wider neoliberal framework. This provides a more definitive historical moment from which to position repetitions and

[47] Ibid., p. xi.
[48] Matthew McManus, 'What is Post-Modern Conservatism?', in *What is Post-Modern Conservatism: Essays on Our Hugely Tremendous Times*, ed. by Matthew McManus (Winchester & Washington: Zero Books, 2020), pp. 23-26, (p. 26).

alternations within post-Cold War uses of postmodern aesthetics. The collapse of alternatives to a dominant capitalist framework provides the overarching historical backdrop to this thesis' analysis, informed by this cultural shift from 'late' to 'advanced' capitalism within neoliberalism. Historical events within this broader advanced capitalist framework are then considered within specific chapters, offering further precise insights into the shifts within the lasting impact of this seismic event within American culture. It is not so much a question of whether or not American culture remains neoliberal. Instead, it seems more productive to analyse in what ways uses of postmodern aesthetics have been shaped by the collapse of political alternatives to capitalism, and how postmodern aesthetics continue to articulate an enclosure within this inescapable advanced capitalist framework.

The change in terminology from late to advanced capitalism to account for a cultural shift could be compared to the move to post-postmodernism from postmodernism. Yet, where there remains a consensus regarding the continued dominance of capitalism's framework, this is not the case for postmodernism, as either a preferred aesthetic or persistent cultural epoch. This distinction fundamentally alters the way these terms are reconceptualised and the implications for doing so. The use of advanced capitalism presents a shift within an extended cultural epoch, demarcating a distinct historical moment where capitalism shows no sign of ending that impacts American culture and writing. By contrast, the range of terms used to define a period 'after' postmodernism in literary criticism, and cultural and political theory minimises its contemporary relevance, inferring a succession from a cultural epoch that remains intact. Furthermore, the plurality of terms that seek but fail to surpass postmodernism obscure how, collectively, they internalise and extend its cultural logic. An expanded deregulated capitalist framework produces a cultural internalisation of postmodernism, typified by its depictions of complexity and contradiction that reflect the inability to imagine a succession from advanced capitalism. For this reason, the continued use of the term postmodernism compensates for this overstated succession, emphasising the parallel shifts within a postmodern capitalist epoch that has yet to be succeeded.

Repetition expresses a relocation of postmodernism that extends and transforms rather than succeeds the cultural epoch it demarcates. Paolo Virno's description of the

continued present as a form of déjà vu informs the conceptualisation of repetition presented here, within a twenty-first century American context. The perpetual present produced by the inability to radically transform capitalism means 'time is turned to stone, the vortex of change cannot hide the monotonous repetition of unalterable archetypes, and that everyday surprises are trite and all too well known to us.'[49] This contradictory relation to time combines an epoch that changes, while also extending the present into a never ending epoch that combines capitalism and postmodernism, which I interrogate through American fiction. As Virno states, 'Déjà vu arises when the past-*form*, applied to the present, is exchanged for a past-*content*,' producing a disorientating experience of repetition 'when the *possible*-present is exchanged for the *real*-past.'[50] Postmodernism produces a comparable form of déjà vu in contemporary American fiction and culture. Although a range of historical and cultural events demarcate changes that apparently succeed postmodernism, its form, insights and methodologies are repeated in the contemporary moment. This means postmodernism not only applies to the present, but also through a new set of content arising from a context that is both distinct from and an extension of a postmodernism of the past. Repetition therefore provides a valuable set of critical reflections upon the contemporary moment. In this thesis, repetition is drawn upon to foreground a connection to the past, rather than attempts to succeed postmodernism, such as the post-postmodernisms, accelerationism, or posthumanism.

To consider the repetitions of postmodernism within contemporary American culture confronts its apparent marginality within contemporary literary criticism. Instead of stripping contemporary American fiction of its connection to postmodernism, it can be recalibrated by considering the various ways that postmodernism is contemporarily repeated. Broadly speaking, postmodernism's legacy is presented in one of four ways: it is explicitly rejected, it is semantically reworked, a succeeding concept is provided, or an ambiguous succession is positioned. However, in each instance postmodernism is either implicitly or explicitly repeated, emphasising a changing but persistent currency

[49] Paolo Virno, *Déjà Vu and the End of History*, trans. by David Broder (London & New York: Verso, 2015), p. 181.
[50] Ibid., p. 18.

within contemporary American culture. This collective desire for a transition from postmodernism reflects an internalised desire to succeed the totalising force of advanced capitalism. For this reason, the awkward and frustrated experience of failed succession is central to both a contemporary understanding of postmodernism and advanced capitalism. This complexity is minimised when postmodernism is side-lined rather than confronted and interrogated within literary criticism describing twenty-first century American culture.

James Annesley defines twenty-first century American culture against postmodernism through a shift into globalised capitalism. He uses this alternative framework to describe 'a sense of the ways in which critical and creative possibilities can be sustained within a globalizing consumer society through relationships with consumption.'[51] For Annesley, this is fundamentally different from postmodernism, which relies upon a set of critical tools produced within and responding to the culture of sixties and seventies America. Therefore, to apply the insights of postmodernism to a globalised American culture is 'forced to broaden and extend this perspective to the point that it loses its specificity.'[52] Yet, this ignores Annesley's repetition of postmodernism within eighties and nineties American culture via blank fiction, which defines a specific sub-set of postmodern American fiction. Furthermore, it also overlooks Annesley's more covert repetition of postmodernism through his inclusion of *Fight Club* in a description of globalised fictions distinct from postmodernism. Annesley's concern is arguably the ambiguous use of postmodernism as a generalised 'catch-all' term, rather than postmodern texts themselves. [53] Nevertheless, this shift in terminology obscures rather than considers specifically how postmodernism is repeated and how this continues to shape American fiction and culture. Furthermore, after the rise of Donald Trump, the associated backlash against globalisation through nationalism, the proliferation of post-truth, and the integration of postmodernism into the conservative political sphere more broadly, globalisation is unable to account for this

[51] James Annesley, *Fictions of Globalization: Consumption, the Market and the Contemporary American Novel* (London & New York: Continuum, 2008), p.12.
[52] Ibid., p.9.
[53] James Annesley, *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p.4.

persistence. Instead of obscuring an understanding of the contemporary moment, an interrogation of how postmodernism is extended and repeated foregrounds its relevance through specificity rather than abstraction.

A range of other conceptual attempts to define a period 'after' postmodernism have also proliferated within contemporary literary criticism. However, postmodernism is integral to their formulations, suggesting an altered repetition of rather than succession from postmodernism. One of the clearest examples of this appears in Raoul Eshleman's performatism, which he defines as a 'new epoch' that succeeds postmodernism.[54] Eshleman defines this succession of postmodernism through a return to belief, positioned against critical readings of truth which he describes as 'metaphysical optimism.'[55] Yet, when perfomatism continues to rely upon irony, plurality, and critiques of power it becomes more difficult to position it as an epochal shift. This is reinforced when considered alongside a contemporary American political landscape that foregrounds the repeated relevance of postmodernism through new incarnations of conservative postmodernism. Eshleman is undoubtedly correct to recognise a cultural shift since the eighties, which should be considered in relation to the production of American art that responds to and reflects these changes. The central problem with his thesis, however, is the premature demarcation of a new epoch, based upon a process of change rather than radical transformation. This haste to produce a successor to postmodernism masks the continued relevance of many of postmodernism's features, which are repeated in the contemporary moment.

A further attempt to account for a succession from postmodernism stems from affect theory, positioning emotional and bodily responses against postmodern apathy. Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg consider 'affect as potential,' emphasising an ability to produce impact through intensities that account for 'a body's *capacity* to affect and to be affected,' including a reader's interaction with a text.[56] This focus upon

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[54] Raoul Eshleman, 'Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism (*American Beauty*)', in *Supplanting The Postmodern*, ed. by David Redrum and Nicholas Stavris (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 113-151, (p.125).
[55] Ibid., p.122.
[56] Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1-25 (p. 2).

emotional responses implicitly counters the apparently blank, affectless tone of postmodern fiction. However, by emphasising an 'open-ended in-between-ness' affect perpetuates an ambiguity that infers a continued connection to postmodernism beyond its Deleuzian methodology of 'a body's perpetual *becoming*.'[57] Like postmodernism, it articulates an experience of immersion within a system that changes but without the necessity of reaching either radical transformation or a space beyond. Furthermore, despite positioning this capacity to be affected against postmodernism's perceived apathy, there are numerous instances of emotional responses of characters within postmodern fiction. Similarly, it is difficult to imagine a reader of even blank fiction being irresponsive to the hyper-violence of texts like *American Psycho* and *Sadie: The Sadist*, or the despair of *Empire of the Senseless* and *Taipei*'s protagonists. Instead, the insights produced by affect theory seem integral to postmodernism rather than overtly distinct from it.

Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* provides one of the most useful examples of the connection between postmodernism and affect. Berlant defines cruel optimism as existing when 'something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.'[58] For Berlant, this makes emotional attachment integral to the inhibition of radical transformation that informs her method of textual analysis. Although this implicitly focuses upon an individual's potential to change, despite their unwillingness to do so, Berlant also considers this on a systemic level. Politically, cruel optimism incorporates an optimism that 'might not be cruel at all.'[59] This suggests the significance of a shift in perspective of how obstacles are perceived, which underpins her approach. She positions optimism as 'the bare minimum evidence of not having given up on social change,' contrasting political withdrawal or apathy, even in the face of 'the impasse of the historical present.'[60] Although this distinction from apathy is significant, the optimism Berlant presents reflects a contemporary desire to surpass postmodernism, articulating contemporary frustrations in a way that potentially exacerbates them. Postmodernism could be described as a negative attachment preventing succession to a new cultural

[57] Ibid., p. 3.
[58] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 1.
[59] Ibid., p. 259.
[60] Ibid.

epoch, making it a nihilism stripped of its Nietzschean creative affirmation. When viewed in this way, postmodernism can be connected to Berlant's description of negative attachment, where 'even with an image of a better good life available to sustain your optimism, it is awkward and it is threatening to detach from what is already not working.'[61] Yet, the repeated failure to articulate a consensus of what comes 'after' postmodernism could equally be described as an over attachment to succession. In this way, an over attachment to succession comes at the expense of considering the ways postmodernism's contemporary repetitions help articulate the perpetual dominance of advanced capitalism. This is even more pertinent in the contemporary political climate of American culture, where postmodernism retains a currency in its articulations of frustrations with advanced capitalism from within a postmodern cultural epoch.

In his article titled 'The End of Books,' Rober Coover (1992) presents the hypertext as a new digitised literary approach, providing a logical continuation of postmodernism that repeats a number of its features. For Coover, the hypertext illustrates the 'Dawn' of a new era, looking forward to a future beyond an end presented in post-structuralist, and implicitly also postmodern, theory.[62] The hypertext provides 'true freedom from the tyranny of the line' for Coover, via more versatile means of engaging with these works through 'multiple paths between text segments' provided by digital technology.[63] This medium where 'all the comforting structures have been erased,' and which favours 'a plurality of discourses over definitive utterance' digitally mobilises features central to both postmodern culture and Coover's earlier postmodern novels.[64] It therefore produces a digitised experience Coover calls 'truly a new and unique environment,' but one which remains indebted to postmodernism by repeating its features within a new context.[65] This is reiterated by J. Yellowlees Douglas, who positions the avant-garde newness of hypertexts as distinct in an era where newness is 'restricted mostly to revived artefacts that have been sitting out the past few decades,'

[61] Ibid., p. 263.
[62] Coover, 'The End of Books'.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.

otherwise known as postmodern pastiche.[66] However, Douglas also acknowledges the limited attention hypertexts have received academically, and seemingly the small number of them that have been produced.[67] Despite this limited appeal, hypertextuality foregrounds a connection between digital technology and postmodernism, rather than presenting the advent of digital culture as a successor to postmodernism. Its perceived newness should be viewed as an aesthetic variation within postmodernism's persistent cultural epoch. Hypertextuality therefore repeats postmodernism's conventions within a new context, evidencing a continuation that is too readily presented as a succession from rather than shift within postmodernism.

In a range of other instances the insights of postmodernism are repeated, but semantically described in ways that minimise a connection to postmodernism. Kathryn Hume's analysis of aggressive fictions exemplifies this semantic reframing of postmodern American fiction within a twenty-first century context. Instead of using postmodernism as part of her critical framework, which she describes as connected to a fragmentation that is 'difficult to piece together,' Hume prioritises aggression and forms of extremity that offer more concrete methods of textual analysis.[68] Violence provides a textual response to a 'political despair aimed at America,' used to 'bewilder and nauseate the reader,' shocking them by attacking their values.[69] Yet, Hume also states that the texts her study focuses upon 'not only refuse to give us a coherent picture but also tend to abandon the generic patterns of plot and closure, and thus deny us relief and enjoyment.'[70] In doing so, she emphasises a connection to postmodern texts, themes, and approaches, particularly those of blank fiction which, as Annesley claims, emphasise 'the extreme, the marginal and the violent.'[71] This is reinforced by Hume's choice of texts, including a number by authors – including Ellis, Cooper, Acker, and Palahniuk – who are canonical to both blank fiction specifically, and postmodernism more broadly. Hume suggests representations of aggression provide an opportunity to

[66] J. Yellowlees Douglas, *The End of Books – Or Books Without End? Reading Interactive Narratives* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 2.
[67] Ibid., p. 73.
[68] Kathryn Hume, *Aggressive Fictions: Reading The Contemporary American Novel* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2012), p. 6.
[69] Ibid., p. 7.
[70] Ibid., p. 2.
[71] Annesley, *Blank Fictions*, p. 1.

reconsider how to approach texts, where 'Instead of applying formulas, we must think and test our interpretative templates and try to construct new ones.'[72] Further examples of this can be seen in contemporary readings of *American Psycho*. For Naomi Mandel, the novel embodies 'violence *as* critique,' replacing postmodernism with extremity and violence.[73] Similarly, for Georgina Colby Ellis' work provides a 'contemporary form of refusal' through a process of underwriting, focusing upon political subversion.[74] However, it should also be considered how these new approaches continue to repeat the insights of postmodernism, relocating them within new cultural and literary contexts. In each instance, postmodernism is semantically replaced and also repeated, suggesting a prescience of postmodernism within the contemporary moment that requires further consideration.

Other critics have more directly confronted this ambiguous persistence of postmodernism, but prioritise conceptualising a period 'after' over repetitions. Linda Hutcheon describes postmodernism as 'a thing of the past' due to it now being 'fully institutionalized.'[75] This is partly true, and can be recognised in the various ways postmodernism's insights have become commonplace. The acceptance of postmodern methodologies, the canonisation of postmodern fiction, or the internalisation and mobilisation of postmodern features within the contemporary American political sphere, particularly within conservative politics, illustrate this alteration within the cultural place postmodernism holds in contemporary society. Hutcheon aligns this shift with post-postmodernism, and claims this alteration 'needs a new label of its own.'[76] Yet, in doing so, she potentially marginalises the complexity of this shift by prioritising the definition of this 'after' postmodernism over the ways it continues to be repeated. Instead, a reappraisal of postmodernism's repetitions within contemporary culture could account for the changes Hutcheon cites, interrogating how it has become culturally internalised.

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[72] Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, p. 169.
[73] Naomi Mandel, '"Right here in Nowheres": *American Psycho* and Violence as Critique', in *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme*, ed. by Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel (London & New York: Continuum, 2006), pp. 9-19, (p. 18).
[74] Georgina Colby, *Bret Easton Ellis: Underwriting the Contemporary* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 1.
[75] Linda Hutcheon, 'Epilogue: The Postmodern … in Retrospect', in *Supplanting The Postmodern*, ed. by David Redrum and Nicholas Stavris (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 5-9, (p. 5).
[76] Ibid., p. 8.

This focus upon repetitions rather than succession also connects this partial institutionalisation to the contemporary cultural currency other critics like Hume, Mandel and Colby continue to present in postmodern American novels. A focus upon the repetitions rather than succession accounts for these contradictory contemporary variations of postmodernism, considering how they can co-exist within the present, and what this means for the continued legacy of postmodernism.

Metamodernism provides the clearest example of an attempt to account for the continuation of postmodernism, combined with the need for a new term Hutcheon asserts. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Verneulen describe metamodernism as a way of accounting for this recalibrated relation to postmodernism in a way that does 'not offer a solution to the problematic of postmodernism (however the postmodern is perceived).'[77] Instead of a new movement or phase distinct from postmodernism, they describe 'a structure of feeling that emerges from, and reacts to, the postmodern as much as it is a cultural logic that corresponds to today's stage of global capitalism.'[78] This emphasises 'an oscillating in-betweenness' produced by a feeling of transition, while retaining many of postmodernism's characteristics, specifically its reliance upon appropriation and pastiche.[79] However, while metamodernism embodies a number of the characteristics aligned with the repetition of postmodernism, from the perspective of this thesis and the arguments that follow, there are a number of more overt distinctions between them. Firstly, the 'transitional period' Akker, Gibbons and Verneulen align with the birth of metamodernism is located at the beginning of the new millennium, rather than the fall of the Soviet communism.[80] Its periodisation therefore does not account for the shifts within late twentieth century postmodern American texts that have begun to reflect this recalibrated relation to both advanced capitalism and postmodernism. In doing so, it implicitly marginalises the ways these texts retain a contemporary prescience in describing this altered relation in the

[77] Robin Van Den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, 'Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism', in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism*, ed. by Robin Van Den Akker, Alison Gibbons & Timotheus Vermeulen (London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), pp. 1-19, (p. 5).
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid., p. 10.
[80] Ibid., p. 12.

present moment, and how their insights and anxieties are repeated within the contemporary moment. Secondly, metamodernism does not privilege the extremity and experimental features of postmodernism embodied by the grouping of texts in the coming chapters. Instead, they assert that 'postmodern discourses have lost their critical value when it comes to understanding contemporary arts, culture, aesthetics and politics.'[81] By contrast, the texts analysed here suggest a partial vitality retained through postmodern discourses. The works' focus upon extremity and experimentalism illustrate the at times contradictory ways postmodernism is repeated today, accounting for a waning critical value in some instances, and a new-found vitality in others. Repetitions of postmodernism articulate a comparable experience of transition to metamodernism, but prioritise the extremity and complex realism of postmodernism's aesthetics to navigate, reflect upon and critique a contemporary American experience of advanced capitalism.

Postmodernism is now commonly defined through transition, which attempts to account for a range of cultural shifts that have reshaped its contemporary uses. This necessarily articulates the various cultural shifts since the eighties that define the American cultural experience within the twenty-first century. Yet, an inability to radically transform advanced capitalism is projected onto these attempts to position an 'after' postmodernism. They relocate a socio-political desire for succession within an apparently more achievable succession of postmodern aesthetics. In doing so, this fixation upon succeeding postmodernism partly obscures a postmodern continuum that compliments the shift from late to advanced capitalism. This is not to discount the array of ways contemporary society has been altered, but more simply to argue they have reshaped rather than succeeded the postmodern experience. By considering these changes though a critical framework of repetition rather than succession, the disparate and at times conflicting ways postmodernism persists embraces the complexity of its continued legacy. Repetition provides a different way of conceptualising this relation to postmodernism, which sheds new light upon its continuation within both American culture and contemporary fiction. When transition is considered through repetition rather

[81] Ibid., p. 3.

than succession, the reappraisal of twenty-first century postmodernism sheds new light upon the critical functions it has adopted in the contemporary American moment.

Each of the following chapters interrogates a different form of repetition, illustrating the divergent ways in which this postmodern continuum connects to twenty-first century American culture. The first two chapters analyse canonical late twentieth century postmodern novels, assessing individual and collective forms of failure and commodification that perpetuate an inability to radically transform advanced capitalism. Chapter 1 presents the collapsed distinction between systemic mechanisms and rebellion, staged through Patrick Bateman's excesses in *American Psycho*. Bateman is read as the personification of both systemic and subversive excess, making his hallucinatory failure to escape little more than a disillusioned and nihilistic acceleration of capitalist consumption. His repetition of capitalist excess via rebellion, specifically when connected to Trump, illustrates how anti-establishment rebellion can repeat and intensify the systemic privileges and inequalities it claims to challenge. In chapter 2, the failure to escape capitalism becomes a failure to implement new grand narratives through collective violence in *Empire of the Senseless* and *Fight Club*. The novels, focusing either on the aftermath or the build up to acts of collective action, present the failures to implement radical transformation through purifying violence. *Empire of the Senseless*, the only novel considered here published before the fall of Soviet communism, outlines the beginnings of a shift towards a more overt focus upon exteriority rather than interiority, particularly when considered alongside *Fight Club*. This shift is continued in the following chapters, tracing an alteration in the focus of American postmodern texts informed by the arrival of advanced capitalism, which is repeated in both twenty-first century novels and culture. These chapters provide complementary but distinct accounts of postmodern insights and anxieties related to the absence of radical transformation are repeated in the contemporary moment. The triumph of advanced capitalism marks a watershed moment, where the absence of political alternatives intensifies these anxieties, shaping contemporary depictions of subversion, succession, and repetition connected to postmodernism.

The final three chapters focus upon twenty-first century texts, considering how these works combine postmodern aesthetics with contemporary cultural concerns. Each chapter focuses upon a feature used to illustrate the irrelevance of postmodernism – critical exhaustion, digital culture, perceived nostalgia – features that are mobilised here to illustrate postmodernism's extension through repetition. Individually, they dramatise a discrete form of repetition, illustrating a distinct way postmodernism permeates twenty-first century American culture. Chapter 3 analyses how *Love Creeps* and *Sadie: The Sadist* appropriate transgressive tropes to respond to consumer culture, ecological concerns and the discrediting of advanced capitalism in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. They account for transgression's waning critical vitality, due to its entwinement with capitalist excess, through depictions of limits and waste, revitalising its subversive potential rather than seeking to radically transform a capitalist framework they cannot escape. Collectively, they present a further shift towards exteriority, where radical transformation is considered through systemic limits imposed by the stock market and environmentally, rather than through individual or collective action. Chapter 4 considers how *God Jr.* and *Zac's Control Panel* present a failure to break from postmodernism through digital technology, illustrated through their counter-intuitive repetitions of an internalised cultural postmodernism. The introspective focus of these works locate this shift towards exteriority within a digital culture, but repeat postmodern features in regressive and conservative rather than innovative ways that are partly obscured through digital tropes. Cooper's reduction of postmodernism to a waning avant-garde style is positioned against the culturally integrated features of postmodernism, staging a normalised repetition of postmodernism that contrasts chapter 3's revitalisation through a counter-intuitive reading of Cooper's work. Chapter 5 presents the unchanged repetition of postmodernism in *Taipei* and *You Too Can Have A Body Like Mine* as a politicised repetition that stands counter to their apparent nostalgia. This dramatisation of a postmodernism unaffected by contemporary society foregrounds a repetition of hopelessness, where cultural change produces no radical transformation of advanced capitalism. Their apparently uncritical use of canonical postmodern novels stages a meta-critique of the function of repetition, making the repetition of the same a politicised act that overtly reconnects postmodernism to contemporary American culture. These

chapters present the repetition of postmodernism through appropriation and revitalisation, rejection and counter-intuitive reproduction, and also the politicisation of stubborn replication. These chapters provide a disparate set of at times contradictory approaches that together illustrate the diverse ways postmodernism is repeated within contemporary American works.

Collectively, these chapters distinguish forms of cultural change that repeat postmodernism from an absent radical transformation that might succeed it. Together, they interrogate how and why twenty-first century texts draw upon this postmodern vocabulary to articulate the contemporary American moment. These works also illustrate the comparable ways the insights of canonical postmodern American novels continue to be culturally repeated in American society. The cynicism towards succession the analysis of these works produces traces the cultural, political and literary shifts underway within postmodernism since the eighties. When neither advanced capitalism nor seemingly postmodernism can be surpassed at present, the contemporary moment is shaped by attempts to come to terms with this awkward and frustrated process of failed transition. Yet, instead of these failures necessarily producing a perpetual fatalism, another reading of these works is made possible through repetition. Failure not only shapes the need to repeat the mechanisms of postmodernism and advanced capitalism, it also informs the ways repetition itself can be considered as a political act. Repetition provides a means towards a more coherent and specific way of navigating the contemporary moment, interrogating which features of postmodernism have been culturally integrated, and which have been revitalised, and by whom. In doing so, the limits of radical transformation are foregrounded through these textual reflections upon enclosure within an advanced capitalist culture. Repetitions of postmodernism, I argue, continue to provide ways of articulating and comprehending the contemporary moment, but requires a precise understanding of the specific ways this occurs to circumvent an ambiguity that undermines its continued relevance.

1. Subjectivity & Advanced Capitalism: Commodified Rebellion in *American Psycho*

Whatever the apparent cause of any riots may be, the real one is always want of happiness. It shews that something is wrong in the system of government…[82]

The cynical depiction of radical transformation in Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) emphasises a failure of revolution within the legacy of liberalism. Although commonly read as a postmodern satire of eighties America, the text's commodification of revolutionary violence connects it to well established cultural concerns with capitalism's continued dominance. In *White*, Ellis describes *American Psycho*, particularly Patrick Bateman, as the 'logical outcome' of Regan-era capitalist excess.[83] Yet, he also claims '*American Psycho* was about what it meant to be a person in a society you disagreed with and what happened when you had attempted to accept and live with its values even if you knew they were wrong.'[84] Bateman's disgust for the society he characterises foregrounds the novel's central contradiction: what it means to reject and reinforce an inescapable capitalist society. In this chapter, I argue that *American Psycho*'s subjectivised representations of revolutionary failure reflect long-standing attempts to reconcile revolutionary desires with the limited ability to implement those desires successfully. By taking Thomas Paine's writing on revolution as a starting point, I trace the erosion of the potential for liberation through a range of failures represented in Ellis' novel. I demonstrate this by interrogating *American Psycho*'s references to revolutionary uprisings in three historical periods – the aftermath of the French Revolution, the civil unrest of 1968, and the rise of Trump. In doing so, I consider how their shortcomings – connected to idealism, affirmative desire, and liberalism – are reflected through the complexities and nuances of Ellis' novel. Instead

[82] Thomas Paine, 'Rights of Man', in *Rights of Man, Common Sense and Other Political Writings*, ed. by Mark Philp (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 83-197, (p. 217).
[83] Bret Easton Ellis, *White* (New York & London: Picador, 2019), p. 72.
[84] Ibid., p. 226.

of collapsing the historical distinctions between these periods, I interrogate how their connection to *American Psycho* intensifies the apparent absence of radical transformation within advanced capitalism. It is this intensification of postmodernism that foregrounds disillusionment through *Les Misérables* as much as Trump, emphasising postmodern aesthetics' continued ability to articulate a dismay with the dominance of advanced capitalism in the contemporary moment as much as in the eighties. Overall, I claim *American Psycho* frames a critique of capitalism within the failures of liberalism, providing a genealogy of failures I trace throughout this chapter.

This establishes an American cultural context and the repetition of postmodern aesthetics the following chapters develop. Bateman's personification of systemic violence, its conflation with the failures of revolutionary desire, and his inability to even successfully imagine a space outside advanced capitalism remains subjectively focused. The subsequent chapters expand upon the contemporary relevance of postmodernism, specifically its shift from internal to exteriority, and the different ways texts attempt to revitalise, surpass, or repeat its principles. Although *American Psycho* is not the earliest novel analysed in this thesis, it is a lynchpin in my argument for postmodernism, enabling me to provide an overview of my methodological approach, argument and the concerns that will subsequently be elaborated upon.

Personifying Revolution and its Failures: From Thomas Paine to Patrick Bateman

American Psycho undermines the spirit of revolutionary freedom, personified by Thomas Paine, through Bateman, who allegorises a continual failure to implement radical transformation. Paine lived in what he called 'an age of Revolutions,' actively contributing towards the American Revolution, and publishing extended critical commentary on the French Revolution that followed.[85] His description of American society – 'There, the poor are not oppressed, the rich are not privileged' – becomes an exemplar of American ideals of liberty, meritocracy and success.[86] Yet, the American Revolution that 'led to a discovery of the principles, and laid open the imposition of

[85] Paine, 'Rights of Man', p. 197.
[86] Ibid., p. 218.

governments' is unable to fully realise them, resulting in a perpetually failed revolutionary potential that is dramatised in *American Psycho*.[87] Where Paine personifies the hope of these founding American beliefs, Bateman embodies their dark underside, emphasising the potential violence, inequality and failure they also contain. *American Psycho* reframes the defining beliefs that shaped American culture within postmodern depictions of nihilism, recalibrating how this revolutionary potential is considered. The colonial British power is replaced by globalised capitalism, societal plenitude becomes the systemic excesses of consumer culture, and democratic freedoms culminate in the unremitting expressions of violent rage. Ellis' novel dramatises these founding beliefs, taking them to their shocking conclusion within an advanced capitalist framework that cannot be escaped or radically transformed.

American Psycho depicts a cynical counter-point to this revolutionary potential through the repeated commodification of dissent, asserting the dominance of advanced capitalism through a disillusionment with failed revolutionary transformation. The America Paine described as being a nation 'in the beginning of a world' after gaining independence notably differs from Ellis' America.[88] Paine states that 'If there is any true cause of fear respecting independence, it is because no plan is yet laid down,' foregrounding a cultural anxiety derived from an inability to imagine what a newfound freedom from British rule might look like.[89] By contrast, *American Psycho* critically reflects upon the limits of a liberty co-opted by capitalism's excesses, the inequality this perpetuates, and the apparent impossibility of radically transforming society in a way that accounts for these shortcomings. The novel's depiction of freedom relies upon an enclosed capitalist framework, making it impossible to imagine what this apparently unachievable transformation might look like. Slavoj Žižek's description of twenty-first century rioters blindly 'acting out' considers an undirected revolutionary rage that is comparable to Bateman's rage:[90]

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[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid., p. 238.
[89] Thomas Paine, 'Common Sense', in *Rights of Man, Common Sense and Other Political Writings*, ed. by Mark Philp (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 1-59, (p. 32).
[90] Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London & New York: Verso, 2012), p. 54.

> The sad fact that opposition to the system cannot articulate itself in the guise of a realistic alternative, or at least a coherent utopian project, but only takes the form of meaningless outburst, is a grave indictment of our epoch. What function does our celebrated freedom of choice serve when the only choice is effectively between playing by the rules and (self-)destructive violence?[91]

Žižek's interpretation of the 2011 London riots is not necessarily a consensus viewpoint. Yet, his description lends itself well to a reading of Bateman's unfocused rage, which embodies an absence of alternatives to advanced capitalism. Contemporary rioters might share the unhappiness that defines Paine's treatise for independence, but *American Psycho* presents this as goalless expressions of misdirected rage rather than constructive revolutionary action.

American Psycho's inclusion of *Les Misérables* frames the novel's disillusionment with the revolutionary period Paine's cross-Atlantic idealism represents, intensifying depiction of the failure of radical transformation in Ellis' text. Paine's description of the French Revolution provides a useful counterpoint to *American Psycho*'s depiction of *Les Misérables*. Where Paine reflects upon the French Revolution through the lens of American liberty, *American Psycho* accelerates a disillusionment with the limits of radical transformation in post-revolutionary France. This emphasises a postmodern cynicism through the novel's recurring depictions of failure and commodification. *Les Misérables* is mentioned nineteen times, providing allusions to revolutionary violence that could easily be mistaken for the French Revolution.[92] However, when *Les Misérables*' references to the failed 1832 Parisian Uprising are acknowledged, *American Psycho*'s bleak depiction of revolutionary stagnation rather than a hopeful investment in revolutionary potential is reinforced. This bleaker depiction of *Les Misérables* is established on the opening page of the novel, where the graffitied phrase 'ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE' is obscured by an advertisement for the play on a passing bus.[93] The scene presents a dystopian

[91] Ibid.
[92] Colby, *Bret Easton Ellis*, p. 77; Jill Harsin, *Barricades: The War of the Streets in Revolutionary Paris, 1830-1848* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 57.
[93] Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 2002), p. 3.

advanced capitalism that is quite literally masked by commodified depictions of revolution, repeating and sanitising the very thing the novel presents as unachievable.

Textual references to *Les Misérables* can be read as intensifications of this connection to the post-revolution cynicism of the 1832 Uprising, foregrounding the novel's postmodern repetition of failed radical transformation. Instead of collapsing historical differences, these reference points build from the historical context of the novel – combining the legacy of American liberty with the pop cultural commodification of the symbolic failures of revolution in eighties culture. *American Psycho* can be read as personifying capitalist excess and success through Bateman at a time when revolutionary alternatives are collapsing. He embodies intensification of capitalist principles through the deregulation of Reaganomics, expanding inequality through an economic liberty that plays out in the novel. The textual representations of *Les Misérables* reinforce not only advanced capitalism's unquestioned success, embodied by Bateman, but also an inability to think beyond it, despite examples of inequalities that previously facilitated revolutionary outbursts.

The Uprising's connection to *American Psycho* is significant not solely because of its failures, although this is also noteworthy, but because it was a reaction to the failures of the liberalism ushered in by the French Revolution. The increased industrial prosperity of Paris stood in stark contrast to the overcrowded and unsanitary environment it created, where wages stagnated and working hours remained long for the underclass that were exploited despite or perhaps even because of this growth.[94] This is represented by the misérables of Victor Hugo's novel and the adapted musical, as well as being echoed through the vulnerable people Bateman preys on in *American Psycho*. 1830s France also saw the initial transformation of the middle classes into what Roger Magraw calls a 'burgeoning consumer culture,' which fostered a tension between more traditional notions of frugality and a newfound hedonistic desire for luxury; an excess that runs wild in *American Psycho* through Bateman.[95] In a sense, Bateman takes the Romantic consciousness of the Parisian rebels – which Jill Harsin describes as 'a republicanism of excess and sacrifice' – that acted as a catalyst in their violent

[94] John P.T. Bury, *France, 1814-1940*. 4th Edition (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 51-52.
[95] Roger Magraw, *France 1800-1914: A Social History* (London: Longman, 2002), p. 303.

outburst, but literalises and perverts it in his embodiment of capitalist excess.[96] Sonia Baelo-Allué claims *Les Misérables* provides 'the background of everything that happens in [Ellis'] story,' where the collective disillusionment these two narratives share depicts a more bleak future than Paine's understanding of independence.[97]

In the chapter of Hugo's novel titled '5th June 1832,' he describes frustrated dissatisfaction as one of the 'elements of a revolt,' presenting violent outbursts as a direct response to the perceived limits of social transformation.[98] The date marks the beginning of the June rebellion, an insurrection that was crushed days later, emphasising a failure of revolt that resonates with *American Psycho*, partly through its references to *Les Misérables*. In Ellis' novel, the commodification of revolutionary rage is reduced to the personal – embodied by Bateman – to foreground a disillusionment with an inescapable capitalist system, comparable to the failures depicted in *Les Misérables*. This connection adds significance to Ellis' textual references to *Les Misérables*, via their shared relation to violence, revolutionary potential and failure. Bateman's excessive violence leads nowhere, much like that of the 1832 Parisian dissidents, reinforcing a disillusionment with the limits of radical change that foreground a shared sense of disillusionment articulated by postmodernism.

American Psycho frequently references *Les Misérables* through advertisements, foregrounding the commodification of revolutionary violence. As Thomas Heise argues, the poor in *American Psycho* become 'human advertisements for a musical of Victor Hugo's novel of pre-revolutionary foment that has been watered down to a middle-class audience.'[99] Yet, this sanitisation of revolutionary sentiments extends further to include *American Psycho*'s depictions of *Les Misérables*, which largely focuses on advertisements to the musical, rather than simply the novel's depictions of poverty. These allusions to *Les Misérables* historically locate *American Psycho* within eighties American culture, while literally flattening out references to Hugo's novel into posters and play bills. The poverty of *Les Misérables* contrasts Bateman's excesses, from

[96] Harsin, *Barricades*, p. 6.
[97] Sonia Baelo-Allué, 'Serial Murder, Serial Consumerism: Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho', *Miscellanea: A Journal of English and American Studies*, 26 (2002), 71-90, (p.80).
[98] Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. by Norman Denny (London: Penguin Classics 1982), p. 883.
[99] Thomas Heise, 'American Psycho: Neoliberal Fantasies and Death of Downtown', *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, 67 (1) (2011), 135-160 (p.142).

taunting a homeless man with his 'tease-the-bum-with-a-dollar trick' under one poster, to vomiting beneath another in a Roman-esque expression of decadence, after stealing and gorging on a tin of ham.[100] As Elizabeth Young notes, the references to *Les Misérables* force the reader 'to contrast Hugo's spirited starvelings with the bloated, spiritually impoverished characters of the text,' juxtaposing Bateman's wealth and decadence against the abject poverty and his lack of empathy towards it.[101] The novel trivialises and sanitises these references to *Les Misérables*, replacing its revolutionary violence with Bateman's personification of liberty through capitalist excess. In doing so, *American Psycho* emphasises the perversion of an American quest for liberty by dramatically representing the cost of pursuing it without restraint. Namwali Serpell connects Bateman's despair to these superficial references to *Les Misérables*, suggesting 'The "namelessness" of the dread Patrick repeatedly feels makes it as empty as the allusions to *Les Misérables*, which make no reference to its actual story.'[102] Here, Bateman's superficiality, his embodiment of capitalist excess and his despair become intertwined with the revolutionary violence of *Les Misérables* through their shared subjugation under advanced capitalism. *American Psycho* repeats the failure and despair of *Les Misérables* by reducing Hugo's depiction of the Parisian Uprising to a commodity emptied of its revolutionary violence.

This connection underpins the tension in capitalism-driven western societies between liberty and equality Ellis' novel intensifies through Bateman. In the text's first scene of violence, Bateman blinds a homeless man and maims his dog because of the man's supposedly 'negative attitude' towards work; moments later, a *Les Misérables* playbill 'tumbles down the cracked, urine-stained sideway.'[103] Together, these images draw an immediate comparison to the economic disparity depicted in *Les Misérables*, presenting the victims of Bateman's outbursts as *American Psycho*'s misérables. Francis Fukuyama alludes to this tension between liberty and equality when positioning

[100] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 109.
[101] Elizabeth Young, 'The Beast in the Jungle, The Figure in the Carpet: Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho', in *Shopping in Space: Essays on the American "Blank Generation" Fiction*, ed. by Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney (London & New York: Serpent's Tail, 1992), pp.85-122, (p. 95).
[102] C. Namwali Serpell, 'Repetition and the Ethics of Suspended Reading in *American Psycho*', *Critique*, 51 (2010), 47-73 (p.58).
[103] Ellis, *American Psycho*, pp. 125, 123.

democratic capitalism as the, now contentious, pinnacle of societal development. Fukuyama claimed that liberal democratic capitalism has meant things have 'gotten *better*,' because of the increased peace and range of freedoms found in post-war western societies.[104] Yet, he also admits it has been unable to resolve the disparity between liberty and equality, stating that 'while capitalism may be capable of creating enormous amounts of wealth, it will continue to fail to satisfy the human desire for equal recognition.'[105] Alternative social models cannot be imagined without descending into war and chaos, implying even this progressive socio-economic evolution can only mask rather than resolve the contradiction integral to liberal democratic capitalism. Bateman personifies this tension, embodying all the autonomous freedoms promised by a supposedly meritocratic society, while also ignoring the societal privileges of being an affluent, white, (largely) heteronormative male that facilitate them.

Despite a few notable exceptions, such as Paul Owen, Bateman's choice of victims foregrounds a tension between equality and liberty that underpins the novel's depiction of advanced capitalism. Young's suggestion that Bateman is 'a thoroughly democratic killer' embodies Fukuyama's contradiction, using meritocracy to mask violence inflicted upon vulnerable members of society.[106] Bateman's outbursts of violent rage often include some form of societal prejudice – frequently racial or patriarchal, but also occasionally sexual. This is justified through his victims' supposed inferiority, laziness, or inability to assimilate effectively, making Bateman the personification of capitalism's systemic violence. Yet, it is not only Bateman's expressions of capitalist excess that are significant, but also how they contrast the superficial and commodified revolutionary violence of *Les Misérables*. *American Psycho*'s contrast between rich and poor, forged through its depictions of *Les Misérables*, emphasises their contrasting expressions of revolutionary violence and a shared despair, which Ellis' novel intensifies.

Of the nineteen references *American Psycho* makes to *Les Misérables*, the play is only directly mentioned twice, and Hugo's novel is never directly referenced. Instead,

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[104] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man* (London & New York: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 12.
[105] Ibid., p. 292.
[106] Young, *Shopping in Space*, p. 113.

Ellis' text either references advertisements for or renditions of songs derived from the musical adaptation. The merits of the British and American soundtrack are debated, songs are played, or an array of renditions performed, but the political significance of their narrative context remains absent. By distancing the revolutionary violence of *Les Misérables*, *American Psycho*'s superficial allusions to it emphasise its commodification and sanitisation, contrasting Bateman's excessive violence, which perpetuate the inescapable values of advanced capitalism. Violence subsequently shifts towards the systemic from the revolutionary through Bateman's personification of systemic violence, intensifying the claustrophobia of capitalism's seemingly inescapable framework.

By dislocating as well as commodifying *Les Misérables*' revolutionary violence, *American Psycho* dramatises a dismay with both liberalism and revolt, reinforced by *American Psycho*'s references to the musical's soundtrack. This superficiality and commodification of rebellion is clear at Evelyn's Christmas party, when Bateman cannot even identify the *Les Misérables* soundtrack he repeatedly mentions throughout the novel, asking, 'Is this the British cast recording of *Les Misérables* or not […] what *is* this music?' [107] This question is left hanging with Donald Petersen's unsatisfactory answer, 'Bill Septor […] I think Septor or Skeptor,' adding to the confusion and dislocation that distances *Les Misérables* from the violence it originally portrays.[108] The issue here is not only that Bateman and Petersen are unable to recognise the absence of *Les Misérables*' revolutionary violence, but that they are completely unable to recognise the songs themselves. They cannot even perceive it as a reference point detached from the historical moment it depicts, making it little more than a commodity within their superficial world. This connects to Žižek's suggestion that globalisation 'actively ignores specific conditions,' resisting full historicisation through advanced capitalism's abstraction of possible progression beyond its framework.[109] Again, this is not to produce a reading of the novel that ignores historical differences, even if the novel flattens out these differences to dramatise the recurring failures of achieving radical transformation.

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[107] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 175.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion* (London & New York: Verso, 2001), p. 2.

Like the dislocation of *Les Misérables*' soundtrack for Bateman, it becomes difficult to distinguish events and periods when they reflect a superficiality, which represents the intense despair with capitalism's totalising force in *American Psycho*. Yet, it is not specifically that history becomes irrelevant, particularly when historical awareness is central to many of the novel's reference points. Instead, it is important to consider a historical repetition, intensified by this dislocation, where democracy, liberalism and capitalism's recurring failures generate a stasis that creates Bateman's despair. This is representative of postmodern cynicism towards radical transformation, illustrating its extension in twenty-first century culture through a sustained inability to construct alternatives to the continued dominance of advanced capitalism. When describing his inspiration for Bateman, Ellis says he and Bateman are 'disgusted by the society that had created us,' but which also appealed to them, leaving them 'infuriated by the idea that there was nowhere else to go.'[110] Bateman remains trapped within a system his actions endorse, where even his angst is either commodified or perpetuates the systemic violence that contributes towards his misery. The failures of the French Revolution, culminating in the 1832 Uprising and depicted in *Les Misérables*, are repeated in *American Psycho*'s commodification of its revolutionary violence. This repetition connects these historically distinct periods in Ellis' text through a shared sense of postmodern failure, stasis and despair that persists in the contemporary moment.

Roger Clark suggests adapting such a long novel necessarily 'results in the disappearance of some of the socio-political dimensions' of *Les Misérables*, placing *American Psycho* within a lineage of its political sanitisation.[111] Many of these reinterpretations, as Zachary Snowden Smith suggests, 'favoured the clasped hands of romance over the clenched fist of insurrection,' marginalising the revolutionary narrative features.[112] By making reference only to the musical adaptation of *Les Misérables*, and even then prioritising advertisements and soundtracks over the plot, these revolutionary

[110] Ellis, *White*, p. 64.
[111] Roger Clark, 'Introduction', in Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables: Volume One* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2002), pp. v-xviiii, (p. xviii).
[112] Zachary S. Smith, 'Les Mis's Neglected Revolution', *Green Left Weekly*, 12th July 2014 <https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/56849> [accessed 17th July 2019].

sentiments are further marginalised. Ellis' novel depicts the commodification of this revolutionary violence, contrasting it with Bateman's excessive violence. This means *American Psycho* reimagines the location of this rage for a late twentieth century context, which extends into twenty-first century culture. Instead of Ellis' references to *Les Misérables* providing a form of 'pop transcendence' as Sonia Baelo-Allué suggests, these allusions infer an intensified inability to escape the characters' pain and disillusionment.[113] The ironic entertainment an audience derives from Hugo's underclass, while disregarding the more contemporary equivalents Baelo-Allué notes is entirely legitimate. However, this connection also emphasises a process of commodification and sanitisation of suffering, presenting an inability to escape rather than an implied transcendence. Failure underpins *American Psycho*'s depiction of revolutionary violence through *Les Misérables*, foregrounding a claustrophobia connected to postmodernism that underpins Ellis' use of excess and superficiality via commodification.

Personifying the Impersonal: the Failure of Revolutionary Desire since May '68

Bateman's excessive desire connects to postmodernism's interrogation of the possibility of progress, alluding to a repetition of revolutionary failure that reinforces the novel's disillusionment. When read in this way, textual depictions of extremity foreground a desire for unrealised revolutionary transformation, encapsulated by postmodernism and repeated in twenty-first century American culture. Naomi Mandel compares Bateman's violent desire to the Marquis de Sade's libertine excessive desire, which similarly relied upon 'the principles of saturation and exhaustion' to critique late-eighteenth century French society.[114] This connection can be extended to include Sade and Ellis' comparable personification of failed revolutionary sentiments through their characters, rather than exclusively focusing on their shared thematic reliance upon excessive desire. This reading challenges Marco Abel's Deleuzian analysis of Ellis' book as a text

[113] Baelo-Allué, 'Serial Murder, Serial Consumerism', p. 80.
[114] Mandel, '"Right Here in Nowheres"', p. 14.

that ‘produces readers incapable of responding to the text’s affective force.’[115] Instead, when the novel’s excessive desire is located within a lineage of failed revolution, Ellis’ text produces a complex and contradictory critique personified by Bateman. This reading emphasises a failure that locates – or repeats – postmodern questions of progress within contemporary discourse. May ’68’s influence upon postmodernism is significant due to the questions it raises regarding the possibility of progress and therefore revolutionary change.[116] More specifically, the influence of May ’68 upon Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s schizophrenic process is significant when considering the comparable revolutionary failures of Bateman’s excessive desire.[117] For Bateman, like the schizophrenic process, affirmative desire provides a revolutionary outburst that ultimately reinforces the capitalist framework it seeks to undermine.

May ’68 culminated in the largest general strike in French history, challenging hierarchical social structures and appearing to instigate radical transformation.[118] Even so, Robert Gildea describes the perception of May ’68 as a ‘failed revolution,’ where people became ‘politically engaged because of a loss of faith,’ presenting despair as a drive towards revolutionary change that remains inadequately actualised.[119] The Parisian student faction constructed barricades that, as Julian Jackson acknowledges, ‘served little purpose beyond the symbolic,’ drawing upon the French Revolution’s most iconic imagery.[120] The reliance upon the French Revolution resonates with *American Psycho*’s superficial references to *Les Misérables*, connecting the novel and May ’68 through a shared sense of despair. Despite the utopian hopes of May ’68, when, as Guattari suggests, ‘everything seemed possible,’ its legacy is one of failure.[121] Instead

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[115] Marco Abel, ‘Judgement Is Not An Exit: Towards an Affective Criticism of Violence With *American Psycho*’, *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, 6 (3) (2010), 137-154 (p. 147).
[116] Kristin Ross, *May ’68 and its Afterlives*. (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 183.
[117] Francois Dosse, *Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari: Intersecting Lives*, trans. by Deborah Glassman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 179.
[118] Julian Jackson, ‘Rethinking May 68’, in *May 68: Rethinking France’s Last Revolution*, ed. by Julian Jackson, Anna-Louise Milne and James S. Williams (London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 3-16 (p. 5).
[119] Robert Gildea, ‘1968 in 2008’, *History Today*, 58 (5) (2008), 22-25 (pp. 24, 23).
[120] Jackson, ‘Rethinking May 68’, p. 9.
[121] Félix Guattari, *Lines of Flight: For Another World of Possibilities*, trans. by Andrew Goffey (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 76.

of achieving lasting change it provided a carnivalesque outburst, after which social structures could in many ways return to normal.[122] This made May '68 a release of built up tension rather than revolutionary transformation, much like the 1832 Parisian Uprising and Bateman's violent outbursts. The lasting impact of May '68 is a cynicism towards progress, arising from this failure, shaping the post-structuralist and postmodern thought influenced by it.[123] In doing so, May '68 extends the failures of the 1832 Parisian Uprising into the twentieth century, connecting it to *American Psycho*'s disillusionment with capitalism and the stunted possibility of radical social transformation.

American Psycho's entwinement of affirmative desire and capitalist excess foregrounds a despair with the limits of radically transforming capitalism, reflected by Bateman's connection to the schizophrenic process. Deleuze and Guattari claim the fluid, fragmented and free-flowing desire of the schizophrenic process '*deliberately scrambles all the codes*' of capitalism through a fragmented desire freed from an Oedipalised psychoanalytic framework.[124] Essentially, the schizophrenic process intensifies and accelerates the mechanisms of capitalism to destabilise it:

> What we are really trying to say is that capitalism, through its process of production, produces an awesome schizophrenic accumulation of energy or charge, against which it brings all its vast powers of repression to bear, but which nonetheless continues to act as capitalism's limit. For capitalism constantly counteracts, constantly inhibits this inherent tendency while at the same time allowing it free reign; it continually seeks to avoid reaching its limits while simultaneously tending towards that limit.[125]

In this respect, it provides what they call an 'absolute limit' to the 'relative limit' of capitalism's fragmentary processes, destabilising its systemic dominance by taking it to an extreme.[126] By Bateman's own admission, his excessive violence offers one of the

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[122] Peter Steinfels, 'Paris, May 1968: The Revolution That Never Was', *The New York Times*, 11th May 2008 <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/11/world/europe/11iht-paris.4.12777919.html?_r=2> [accessed 15th September 2016].
[123] Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives*, p. 183.
[124] Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 16.
[125] Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 37.
[126] Ibid., p. 192.

only ways he can express his previously 'blocked… needs,' forging an immediate and problematic connection to the schizophrenic process through his excessive desire.[127] It is by detaching unblocked desire from the limits placed upon it by capitalism and ethics that the schizophrenic process connects Bateman's various excesses to a problematic revolutionary potential that is both affirmative and creative.

Deleuze and Guattari's theory presents desire as fluid, fragmentary, and excessive rather than limited, claiming this unblocked desire 'produces reality,' something that resonates with both Bateman's excessive desire and his unreliable narration.[128] In form, *American Psycho*'s sentences are frequently disjointed, disrupting coherence and continuity, connecting Bateman's mental instability to capitalism's fluidity and the subsequent difficulty of positioning a revolutionary challenge to it. For example, Bateman admits he is unable to see where 'the lines separating appearance – what you see – and reality – what you don't – becomes, well, blurred.'[129] Here, Bateman's hallucinatory production of reality is combined with punctuation that fragments the flow of the sentence and that connects to two distinct features of the schizophrenic process through theme and form. Fragmentation also occurs on a structural level within the novel's depictions of extremity, rather than just its sentences. Bateman's violent outbursts and detachments from reality are juxtaposed against monologues about music and other apparently mundane features of his existence, fragmenting narrative continuity in a way that reflects his disjointed experience of reality. Similarly, for Deleuze, the virtual and the actual are 'indistinguishable,' making this conflation comparable to Bateman's violent excessive desire, and also the schizophrenic process.[130] More centrally, Bateman's inability to distinguish reality from appearances underpins the novel's critique of progress, via the failure of revolutionary change, particularly of revolutionary desire. This indistinguishability between hallucinatory violence and physical reality positions Bateman as a problematic anti-hero, whose

[127] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 325.
[128] Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 32.
[129] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 363.
[130] Gilles Deleuze & Claire Parnett, *Dialogues II*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson, Barbara Habberjam, and Eliot Ross Albert. (London & New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 114.

reprehensibility is intertwined with a textual critique of capitalism through his unremitting desire.

This fragmentary and fluid approach is reliant upon an unbridled expression of desire that reinforces the mechanisms of capitalism. Accelerationism reflects a contemporary extension of these features of the schizophrenic process and Bateman's critique of capitalism through affirmative, fragmentary desire. Nick Land claims 'Capital is not overdeveloped nature, but underdeveloped schizophrenia,' suggesting this process of fragmentation should be extended rather than inhibited.[131] Therefore, 'The death of capital is less a prophecy than a machine part,' making the destruction of advanced capitalism integral to its systemic process of extension rather than its removal.[132] This connects to Bateman's expressions of violent, sexual and consumerist desire, producing a figure that foregrounds the dark underside of advanced capitalism by foregrounding and problematising its underlying ideology. The allure of this process establishes the appeal of the Deleuzo-Guattarian schizophrenic figure of Bateman, reinforced by Andrew Culp's claim that 'Schizo culture appealed to a society seized by postwar consumer boredom,' making it the advanced capitalist equivalent of Nietzsche's last man.[133] Yet, the appeal of the schizophrenic critical extension of capitalist processes is based upon a seemingly contradictory position, where the absence of alternatives results in the intensification of the mechanisms being critiqued. Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek argue this acceleration provides a 'springboard to launch towards post-capitalism,' eventually producing an as yet unimaginable alternative that responds to the 'paralysis of the political imaginary.'[134] However, while they describe an accelerationism that foregrounds a leftist critique of advanced capitalism, until this potential future can be realised, it results in the extended exacerbation of these problematic features, embodied by Bateman. Intensification as a form of destabilisation necessarily perpetuates capitalism's excesses, reinforcing capitalism's dominance,

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[131] Nick Land, 'Circuitries', in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*, ed. by Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth & New York: Urbanomic, 2019), pp. 289-318, (p. 313).
[132] Nick Land, 'Making it with Death: Remarks on Thanos and Desiring-Production', in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*, ed. by Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth & New York: Urbanomic, 2019), pp. 261-287, (p. 266).
[133] Andrew Culp, *Dark Deleuze* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 48.
[134] Williams & Srnicek, '#Accelerate' pp. 355, 349.

imposed through an ability to co-opt challenges to it. Bateman's affirmative desire exemplifies this, producing an acceleration of capitalist principles that, instead of destabilising, intensifies its most troubling characteristics.

Bateman reaches the 'genuinely schizophrenic' limit that Deleuze and Guattari describe during his Manhattan rampage, where both excessive desire and intense depersonalisation reach new heights.[135] Interestingly, the catalyst of Bateman's violent outburst is a busker 'playing a very beautiful but clichéd saxophone solo' from *Les Misérables*, reinforcing the connection to failed revolution.[136] Bateman shoots the busker, ending the music and beginning the rampage after his silencer fails. Notably, this scene provides the only instance of democratic killing within the novel, as Bateman indiscriminately exterminates anyone he encounters. The scene culminates with an answer phone confession to his lawyer, where he decides 'to make public what has been, until now, my private dementia.'[137] Yet, this confession is undermined by Bateman's unreliable narration, reinforced by the scene's fantastical and cinematic nature. Bateman's admission that his 'mind is out of sync' paradoxically demonstrates an awareness of his unstable grip on reality, further complicating an ability to pigeon hole either his violence or his insanity based on his narration of events.[138] Nevertheless, there are further instances of depersonalisation that suggest an unstable grip of reality, particularly in this scene. Bateman's shift to third person narration mid-way through this rampage reinforces the thematic intensity through the novel's form, demonstrated by Bateman's statement that 'Patrick keeps thinking there should be music.'[139] This desire for a soundtrack ironically references both the scene's cinematic nature and the novel's connection to *Les Misérables*, particularly after the busker's murder. Both the literal absence of the busker and the symbolic failures of French revolutionary violence, specifically the connections to musical interpretations of Hugo's novel, are over-layered by Bateman's unfocused outbursts of excess that ultimately achieve nothing.

[135] Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 36.
[136] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 334.
[137] Ibid., p. 338.
[138] Ibid., p. 337.
[139] Ibid., p. 336.

The Manhattan rampage, and the culmination of Bateman's excessive desire, is quickly followed by *American Psycho*'s most famous monologue. Bateman's lack of fixed identity echoes the depersonalisation of the schizophrenic process, but also makes him a cypher for capitalism – describing himself as an idea, or 'some kind abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory.'[140] Bateman's assertion that '*I simply am not there*' connects him to the schizophrenic process' prioritisation of affirmative desire and fragmentation over fixed, hierarchical identities.[141] Problematically, his 'sketchy and unformed' personality seemingly acts as a catalyst in his extreme violence, detachment, and emotional apathy, reducing any potential Deleuzo-Guattarian creativity to a 'fabricated' and superficial identity that perpetuates amoral desire.[142] This connection infers a sinister underside of the schizophrenic process through a rampant desire and superficiality comparable to both Bateman and capitalism's excesses, critiquing these excesses by amplifying and making them increasingly jarring. Bateman even acknowledges the futility of excessive desire he shares with the schizophrenic process, claiming 'There are no more barriers to cross,' though remaining unsatisfied by the outcome.[143] By unblocking both his desire and identity from the limits imposed upon it, Bateman should theoretically achieve the alleviation from limitation he appears to crave. However, little is achieved in Bateman's outbursts, and even he admits that nothing has been redeemed by crossing either of these thresholds of desire and identity. Instead, this desire, freed from the conventional ethical limits that would otherwise block it, only accelerates and accentuates the problematic aspects of contemporary capitalism and Bateman's rage. It is not only that Bateman wants nobody to escape his dismay with this absent liberation, but also how even this expression is absent of revelatory understanding. His claim to ignorance – 'I gain no deeper knowledge about myself' – emphasises an absence of progress that resonates with the failure of revolution the text personifies through Bateman.[144] If nothing is redeemed, this is because previous models of liberation have been

[140] Ibid., p.362.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid.

unsuccessful, inhibiting the possibility of imagining a distinctly different and better future that partly informs Bateman's rage, while also informing the novel's depictions of revolutionary failure.

The lack of fulfilment Bateman derives from his excesses increases his disillusionment, inferring the failure of revolutionary desire's ability to attain radical, lasting transformation. This is clearest within the two desert scenes, shortly after the Manhattan rampage, which fall either side of the abstraction monologue during dinner with his secretary, Jean. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that 'the schizo was not oedipalizable, because he is beyond territoriality, because he has carried his flows right into the desert.'[145] Comparably, during the first desert scene, Bateman claimed 'This was the geography around which my reality revolved,' connecting him to the schizophrenic process.[146] Deleuze and Guattari valorise the desert as 'the unconsumable' base upon which desire can be produced, contrasting the inconsumable of Bateman's desert, where the absence of consumption is shaped by pain, suffering, starvation and emptiness.[147] It is not simply that Bateman's desert is 'devoid of reason and light and spirit that the mind could not grasp it on any sort of conscious level.'[148] It is also how this scene cynically undermines the conceptual framework of the schizophrenic process, illustrated by Bateman's claim that 'Nothing was affirmative,' alongside his pejorative description of surfaces, suggesting 'surface was all anyone found meaning in.'[149] Instead of the idealisation of the desert and unblocked desire, Bateman describes a senseless world without reflection where 'Evil is its only permanence,' turning the desert into a dystopia that stands counter to the liberating potential Deleuze and Guattari describe.[150]

The 'collective exile and a collective desert' Deleuze and Guattari idealised is undermined by the people Bateman encounters in the second desert scene.[151] The desert collective are 'Ravaged and starving, leaving a trail of dead, emaciated bodies,

[145] Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p.75.
[146] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 360.
[147] Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 12.
[148] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 360.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 412.

they eat weeds and leaves and... lily pads, stumbling from village to village, dying slowly, inexorably.'[152] Rather than offering an escape, the desert becomes 'a home for the dead, an infinity,' where time is slowed, only increasing their suffering.[153] The oddly specific reference to deserts in *American Psycho* could be read as an example of postmodern incongruence, but potentially functions as more than undermining linearity and reinforcing Bateman's status as an unreliable narrator. When Bateman exemplifies the problematic intertwining of the schizophrenic process and capitalist excess, these dystopian desert scenes add a further layer to the novel's critique of capitalism through revolutionary failures. The desert therefore represents another meaningless peak in Bateman's desire, demonstrating a cynicism towards radical social transformation by offering a counter-point to the schizophrenic process' idealism.

The shortcomings of the schizophrenic process and Bateman's affirmative desire reinforces their connection to May '68 through their shared failure to radically transform society. Boris Gobille suggests May '68 prioritised spontaneity and creativity over delegated authority as it 'refused the idea of delegating political authority,' connecting it to the schizophrenic process through its decentralised fragmentation.[154] Likewise, Julian Bourg presents May '68's demonstrations as situating desire at the core of political and social thinking, further reinforcing their connection to the schizophrenic process' affirmative desire.[155] Yet, even this questioning of traditional hierarchical power structures reinforces the fluid and fragmentary dominance of capitalism's social framework, foregrounding the inhibiting of radical transformation through desire. Subsequently, it is not simply that, as Kristin Ross argues, May '68 did not 'provide a "model" that could be repeated, successfully or unsuccessfully.'[156] It is also how the legacy of May '68 comes to represent the features of contemporary capitalist society, combined with the failure of idealism that informs postmodernism's claustrophobic

[152] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 365.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Boris Gobille, 'Exploration, Alienation and the Social Division of Labour in the May-June Movement in France', in *May 68: Rethinking France's Last Revolution*, ed. by Julian Jackson, Anna-Louise Milne and James S. Williams (London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 34-46, (p. 40).
[155] Julian Bourg, 'The Moral History of 1968', in *May 68: Rethinking France's Last Revolution*, ed. by Julian Jackson, Anna-Louise Milne and James S. Williams (London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 17-33, (p. 23).
[156] Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, p. 213.

cynicism, through the very absence of an alternative social model. Deleuze and Guattari adopt the affirmative features of May '68 in the schizophrenic process, but Deleuze similarly recognises *Anti-Oedipus* failed because the task proved 'too big' for them.[157] Like the failures of May '68, the schizophrenic process and Bateman's unrestrained outbursts of desire present socio-political critiques that intensify rather than alleviate the shortcomings of the systemic framework they challenge. The schizophrenic process therefore perpetuates a repeated failure of rebellion, connecting it to *American Psycho* through the shortcomings of excessive desire that intensifies postmodernism's cynicism.

Bateman's affirmative desire personifies the commodification of failed revolutionary desire within an advanced capitalist, postmodern framework. Neither Bateman nor the schizophrenic process' active desire escapes or overtly challenges capitalism, perpetuating and intensifying capitalism's superficiality, commodification, consumerism, and rampant expressions of desire instead. These blurred boundaries are depicted through the text's form, represented by the long sentences during the Manhattan rampage, the novel's violent peak. Here, each extended paragraph begins and ends with ellipses, as the sentences fade in and out of each other without obvious beginning or end. This lack of resolution during the height of Bateman's hallucinations reinforce the shortcomings of excessive desire, as his actions, like the sentences themselves, lead nowhere beyond a superficial, seamless transition to the next page. Similarly, this problematic connection also partly explains how Bateman's various excessive expressions of desire – from his monotonous lists of products to his surreal and extreme violence – potentially both challenges and embodies capitalism's most abhorrent qualities. Yet, the absence of direction expressed through desire makes the novel's critique of capitalism one of desire's failure to distinguish itself from capitalist excess, rather than due to its success. By remaining indistinguishable from many of the negative traits of capitalism that Bateman also embraces, even he becomes disillusioned by the emptiness and meaninglessness of desire.

[157] Gilles Deleuze, 'Preface for the Italian Edition of *A Thousand Plateaus*', in *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975-1995*, trans. by Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina, ed. by David Lapoujade (New York & Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), pp. 313-316, (p. 314).

It is not a question of whether Bateman killed anyone, or even side-stepping his ethically problematic behaviour, but of how successfully the text's critique of desire rationalises its most violent and reprehensible scenes. The absence of retribution both increases the novel's shock-value and reinforces the unreliable narration, though remains reliant upon Bateman's depiction as a hyper-violent serial killer. Bateman's depersonalisation connects him to a lineage of serial killers as well as the schizophrenic process, offering a further problematic example of unblocked desire.[158] As Laura Tanner recognises, rather than being a weakness for Bateman, this lack of subjectivity, like identity fragmentation within the schizophrenic process, 'emerges in Ellis' text as a mark of the psycho's empowerment.'[159] This detachment from a fixed, localised identity resonates with what Mark Seltzer calls the 'social mirror-effect,' where the absence of identity provides a blank slate from which cultural anxieties can be projected onto a specific killer, exemplified by Bateman.[160] He, like Seltzer's social mirror-effect, seems 'merely to reflect back cultural commonplaces: it is as if they have become merely the occasion of social construction reflecting back on itself.'[161] Bateman's abstraction connects him to the fragmentation of identity linked to both capitalism and the schizophrenic process, oddly personifying processes that resist stable subjectification to represent the failures of liberalism and revolutionary desire through their intertwinement with advanced capitalism. Seltzer claims the serial killer is depicted as a 'horrific departure from normalcy and as abnormally normal,' making Bateman's superficial replication of culture, particularly capitalist-accelerated desire, a close replication of this contradiction.[162] Bateman and numerous other characters are mistaken for each other – all of which are nondescript affluent, well-educated, white western men – exemplifying this indistinguishability. Similarly, Bateman tells Bethany why he stays in a job he detests, moments before he kills her – saying, 'I … want … to … fit … in' – offering a further conflation of the mundanities of inclusion and extremities of capitalist excess.[163]

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[158] Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 138.
[159] Laura Tanner, *Intimate Violence: Reading Rape and Torture in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 105.
[160] Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, p. 126.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Ibid., p. 6.
[163] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 228.

Bateman's invisibility not only enables his inconspicuous violence but becomes central to the novel's critique of capitalism and its connection to white male privilege. This problematic entwinement of the systemic violence of capitalism and critiques of it becomes central to *American Psycho*, where the features of capitalism that give Bateman his power make this critique visible, even as it is rendered ineffectively hypocritical by this connection.

Reactive readings of Bateman's depravity make his actions irredeemable, implying a necessary textual depth for a critique of both capitalism and superficiality to function. Michael Clark claims Bateman has 'no "inside," no interior depth,' making the novel's critique of superficiality and capitalist excess contradictory and provocative, since Bateman exemplifies the very things he finds distasteful.[164] Bateman's superficiality replicates the repellent features of capitalism, emphasising the hypocrisy inherent within contemporary critiques of an inescapable framework, as his actions both endorse and critique society's excesses. Therefore, Bateman's superficiality becomes central to the text's critique of capitalism, intensifying the reader's disgust by amplifying potentially obscured cultural features of capitalism. Subsequently, as Elena Gomel suggests, one should also not be deterred from being 'willing to accept the surface at face value' of Bateman, since this gives the novel a shocking quality that intensifies its social critique.[165] Superficiality also foregrounds the commodification of revolutionary violence – from *Les Misérables* to the schizophrenic process – emphasising a claustrophobia this absorption produces within *American Psycho*. Capitalism's inescapable dominance imposes structural limits that make alternatives unimaginable. In response, Bateman's unfocused and hypocritical expression of violent revolutionary desire produces a frustrated critique that ultimately achieves no systemic transformation. Although describing May '68, Clifford Deaton's claim that 'Revolutionary movements are shaped by the political memories they draw on' is also central to *American Psycho*'s depiction of the shortcomings of apparent revolutionary

[164] Michael P. Clark, 'Violence, Ethics, and the Rhetoric of Decorum in *American Psycho*', in *Bret Easton Ellis: American Psycho, Glamorama, Lunar Park*, ed. by Naomi Mandel (London & New York: Continuum, 2011), pp.19-35, (p. 33).
[165] Elana Gomel, '"The Soul of this Man is his Clothes": Violence and Fashion in *American Psycho*', in *Bret Easton Ellis: American Psycho, Glamorama, Lunar Park*, ed. by Naomi Mandel (London & New York: Continuum, 2011), pp. 50-63, (p. 63).

transformation.[166] Ellis' novel extends the failures of the French Revolution that inspired *Les Misérables*, and the failures of the schizophrenic process inspired by May '68, locating them within a postmodern disillusionment with progress and the dominance of capitalism that appears superficial.

Les Misérables and the schizophrenic process not only exemplify this revolutionary failure, they also forge direct connections to capitalist commodification and subjugation, representing a shift from revolutionary to capitalist violence that Bateman embodies. The futility of challenging capitalism is epitomised by the novel's closing line: 'THIS IS NOT AN EXIT.'[167] Bateman's excessive, violent desire provides no exit from consumer capitalism, reinforcing a deadlock his outbursts unsuccessfully rile against. Revolutionary violence therefore fails within Ellis' novel due to the impossibility of disentangling it from capitalism's excess. Although the schizophrenic process aimed to unblock frustrated desire as a way of instigating revolutionary change, its failure links revolutionary desire to capitalist excess, reinforcing an inability to escape advanced capitalism that Bateman's rage embodies. Ultimately, though Bateman cannot be valorised as a hero, whether he is read superficially or otherwise, he provides a subjective allegory of a failed revolutionary desire for transformation, extending from the French Revolution into the twenty-first century.

The Failures of Liberalism and the Twenty-First Century Rise of the New Right

Textual references to Donald Trump connects *American Psycho* to twenty-first century culture, informing the world view of Regan-era capitalism found in Ellis' novel that is partly repeated in Trump's rise to presidency. Trump is mentioned twenty four times in the novel, making him comparably significant to *Les Misérables*. These allusions to Trump largely revolve around his branding through buildings, connecting him to the construction of his empire that made him a famous entrepreneur in the eighties, which contrasts the abject poverty Bateman despises. Yet, what is most interesting about Bateman's fixation upon Trump – described at one point by Evelyn as an 'obsession' –

[166] Clifford Deaton, 'The Memory of May '68: The Ironic Interruption of Democratic Commitment of the Atelier Populaire', *Design Issues*, 29 (2) (2013), 29-41 (p.30).
[167] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 384.

is the joy and confidence he brings Bateman.[168] Trump embodies both the capitalist success Bateman desires and the ruthlessness he unleashes in the novel, making Trump the systemic counterpart to the violence Bateman subjectivises. Trump's inauguration as president reinforces *American Psycho*'s connection to the contemporary – through the literal repetition of Trump's success, the associated political acceleration of the New Right's views, and the intensification of postmodern features through his rise to power.

The 'almost maniacal' behaviour Trump aligns with successful people in his 1987 book, *The Art of The Deal*, is visible in both Bateman's violent excessive desire and Trump's contemporary politics.[169] Both Bateman's actions and the deregulation of Reaganomics reflect Trump's claim 'The point is that you can't be too greedy,' alongside Trump's protectionist presidential policies and tax reforms.[170] Trump and the rise of the New Right offer a comparable form of accelerationism to Bateman. Each reframes conservative-leaning politics connected to deregulation and privatisation – essentially, a return to Reaganomics – as revolutionary challenges to the status quo. Their underlying prioritisation of personal freedom reinforces the features of liberalism adopted by free market capitalism, partly undermining their counter-cultural status. Yet, Trump's presidency also marks a revolutionary departure in his more overtly tyrannical ideological connections, intensifying the world view that informed *American Psycho* in a distinctly different but comparable form of accelerationism to Bateman. Trump's presidency prioritises individual freedoms over universal human rights, while also personifying a disillusionment with globalisation that internalises advanced capitalism's excesses, drawing comparisons to Bateman. In this respect, *American Psycho*'s connection to the contemporary stems from more than Trump's postmodern interpretation of truth, establishing a new approach to debating described as post-truth, where, as Matthew D'Ancona claims, 'There was no stable, verifiable reality – only an endless battle to define it.'[171] If, as D'Ancona states, 'Trump is more symptom than

[168] Ibid., p. 186.
[169] Donald J. Trump & Tony Schwartz, *The Art of The Deal* (London: Arrow Books, 2016), p. 48.
[170] Ibid.
[171] Matthew D'Anacona, *Post Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (London: Ebury Press, 2017), p. 14.

cause,' he represents a repetition of postmodernism in twenty-first century American culture, rather than the establishment of a radical departure from it.[172] Trump and Bateman's shared embodiment of an amplified form of Reaganomics remains reliant upon hierarchical dominance. Their powerful and privileged status repackages their contradictions and unreliable narration as revolutionary to foreground the repeated failures of liberalism's revolutionary uprisings.

Bateman, Trump and the new mainstream right justify their disillusionment and prioritised self-interests by channelling their rage towards demographics who lack their privileges. Although this does not explicitly equate their revival with historical incarnations of fascism, the points of intersection between theorisations of fascism, frustration, desire and political revolution re-contextualise the relevance of *American Psycho* and postmodernism for a contemporary audience. When considering the appeal of fascism, Norman Maier describes societal frustrations as potential forms of mobilisation, claiming 'People are more easily organized around what they do not want than around what they do want.'[173] Though Trump's slogan 'Make America Great Again' apparently contradicts Maier, it is underpinned by a rejection of universal human rights. Where frustration offered a revolutionary catalyst for Hugo, Maier imagines frustrated individuals as easily organised around outlets that often results in directionless aggression, which is 'without motive and hence will appear senseless.'[174] This unfocused rage is echoed by Bateman's explicit violence and the implied violence of the new American right, suggesting a recurring desire for systemic change waiting to be mobilised, irrespective of the consequences.

According to Michel Foucault, 'the fascism in us all' is 'the major enemy' of Deleuze and Guattari's schizophrenic process, which resists totalising hierarchical structures of power.[175] Yet, their attempt to release the revolutionary potential of unblocked frustrations reinforces the connection to *American Psycho* through

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[172] Ibid., p. 16.
[173] Norman Maier, 'The Role of Frustration in Social Movements', *Psychological Review*, 49 6 (1942), 586-599 (p. 595).
[174] Ibid., p. 591.
[175] Michel Foucault, 'Preface', in Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. xiii-xvi, (p. xiv).

fragmented outbursts of desire comparable to the directionless individuals Maier described. Bateman's desire not only reinforces his disillusionment, it also accelerates the extremity of capitalism's excesses it reinforces, undermining its revolutionary potential in the process, much like the American New Right connected to Trump.

Additionally, the complex reality Bateman creates through his hallucinatory desire connects him to both postmodernism's indeterminacy and Trump's presidential actions. Paul Mason suggests: 'nothing Trump says is meant literally, nor should be taken seriously. Nor should any of Trump's utterances be held up against normal standards of truth or decency.'[176] Comparably, Bateman's actions and articulations of them are repeatedly thrown into question, making it impossible to know when to take them literally. In *The Art of the Deal*, Trump describes the merits of bravado and hyperbole, claiming 'People want to believe that something is the biggest and greatest and the most spectacular.'[177] This desire to believe in extremity and success reflects a reader's comparable belief in Bateman's unreliable narration of events: his success as a serial killer relies upon the appeal of success, even at its most horrific. Like Trump, Bateman becomes a metaphor for the excesses of advanced capitalism, its contradictory intertwinement with revolutionary programmes that cannot articulate a coherent alternative to it, and where actions are also not consistently judged by conventional ethical standards. Consequently, Trump's connection to both the New Right and Bateman offers a point of convergence, via the repetition of disillusionment and violent revolutionary desire, which gives Bateman's excesses a newfound relevance.

Bateman's idealisation of Trump dramatises the ideological values of liberal democratic capitalism, which carries forward into Trump's presidency. Both personify systemic inequalities masked by liberty, reinforcing these hierarchies through forms of violence that accelerate the systemic challenges supposedly enraging them. Bateman's valorisation of Trump provides the most overt link to the New Right, particularly Milo Yiannopoulos, the notorious and controversial face of the New Right, who referred to Trump as 'Daddy,' albeit as a deliberate provocation.[178] Although Bateman never

[176] Mason, *Clear Bright Future*, p. 20.
[177] Trump, *The Art of the Deal*, p. 58.
[178] Milo Yiannopoulos, *Dangerous* (N.P.: Dangerous Books, 2017), p. 17.

explicitly uses this term of patriarchal adoration, in *White*, Ellis calls Trump 'the daddy [Bateman] never had,' reinforcing this connection to Trump, both personally and ideologically.[179] In *American Psycho*, immediately before killing an old gay man and his dog, Bateman claims seeing a poster of Trump gives him 'a newfound confidence,' suggesting Trump somehow vindicates his violent and cruel actions.[180] Trump's implied endorsement is visible in the values his books contain. By suggesting that 'excuses aren't acceptable,' and failure incurs 'no sympathy, no compassion,' he provides a ruthless vision of capitalism based upon a survival of the fittest model that infers connections to Social Darwinism.[181] These features are extended by both Bateman and right-leaning accelerationism, which intentionally intensify and foreground these features present in Trump's ideological approach. When this is taken further to include the suggestion that a champion is 'someone who shows marked superiority,' capitalist competition and physical dominance become intertwined in a way that ultimately Bateman personifies.[182] To maximise success and minimise empathy justified as meritocracy, as Trump and Bateman do, perpetuates the structural inequalities of capitalism generating the disenfranchisement that led to Trump's rise, foregrounding the contradictions Bateman and the New Right share.

Bateman's success, charisma, white, heteronormative profile and his prioritisation of personal liberty over structural inequality makes him an ideal poster boy for the New Right. He embodies the values of capitalism that perpetuate systemic violence and white male privilege, while positioning himself as a victim of the system he embodies. In Ellis' novel, this is indirectly apparent during the business card scene, where Bateman and his associates aggressively compete in a restaurant while they wait to be served. Bateman's attempt to assert his dominance quickly turns to 'A brief spasm of jealousy,' then depression and eventually rage, exclaiming, 'I suddenly raise a fist as if to strike out at Craig and scream,' as he fails to retain the supremacy he felt he

[179] Ellis, *White*, p. 154.
[180] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 157.
[181] Donald Trump & Robert T. Kiyosaki, *Why We Want You To Be Rich: Two Men One Message* (Scottsdale: Plata Publishing, 2013), p. 189; Donald Trump, *The Way To The Top: The Best Business Advice I Ever Received* (New York: Crown Business, 2004), p. 19.
[182] Donald Trump, *Think Like A Champion: An Informal Education in Business Life* (N.P.: Vanguard Press, 2010), p. 39.

deserved.[183] This resonates with Trump's claim that 'The real excitement is playing the game,' rather than money itself, emphasising the value they both place on competitive success, and the pained rage incurred when this is not achieved on their terms.[184]

Likewise, Yiannopoulos describes a 'victimhood-driven identity politics,' while also asserting a desire for 'identity politics for all,' including white American males. [185] In doing so, he not only positions himself against the perceived status quo, but does so by reinforcing his amendment rights to free speech and personal liberty, describing libertarians and conservatives as 'the new counter-culture' in his re-calibration of contemporary social revolution.[186] Like Yiannopoulos and the New Right, Bateman prioritises personal liberty under the guise of equality, focusing on the anxieties of white male Americans without considering the socio-political context in which they are located. Bateman's desire for both dominance and assimilation perpetuates traditional cultural norms that privilege white Western masculinity, while re-framing this as a quest for equality in a changing society where they feel increasingly marginalised. His previously noted admission to Bethany – 'I … want … to … fit … in' – moments before killing her exemplifies Bateman's contradictory position as both marginalised victim and perpetrator of a systemic violence.[187] Bateman's charisma, education, success and overt whiteness should enable him to fit in, particularly when he and other characters in the novel are frequently mistaken for each other, creating a homogenous mass of white male affluence. However, his perceived dislocation enables him to define his victimhood and disillusionment, despite this hypocrisy, visible through the violence he directs towards those marginalised by poverty, race, gender, or sexuality.

Bateman's prioritisation of liberty over equality, combined with his perceived victimhood, is comparable to the New Right's prioritisation of white male rights through a perception of their social marginality. His affluence seemingly distinguishes Bateman from the New Right's voting base, what Yiannopoulos calls the blue-collar workers America's left 'chose to ignore,' leading to the rise of Trump.[188] Yet, Mason's claim that

[183] Ellis, *American Psycho*, pp. 42, 45.
[184] Trump, *The Art of the Deal*, p. 63.
[185] Yiannopoulos, *Dangerous*, pp. 33, 30.
[186] Ibid., p. 11.
[187] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 228.
[188] Yiannopoulos, *Dangerous*, p. 22.

'economic fatalism,' linked to the dominance of free market capitalism, rather than working-class hardship challenges Yiannopoulos' assertion.[189] Mason suggests a more widespread dismay with the inability to escape advanced capitalism, and the unfocused outbursts of rage that encapsulate the disillusionment of both Bateman and the New Right. Bateman's Manhattan rampage, which leaves him 'intoxicated by the whirlwind of confusion,' captures the complexities of this problematic.[190] His uncharacteristically democratic killing spree – including a busker, taxi driver, cop, concierge, and a janitor – masks an inequality where the poor and frequently racially 'othered' disproportionately experience this violence. Bateman continues to benefit from social inequalities because his actions have no consequences, despite confessing his transgressions over the phone to his lawyer. Even if these outbursts are hallucinations, Bateman's belief he would otherwise evade the law reinforces his social privilege as a white affluent American male, making his self-victimhood even less justifiable. Bateman and the New Right's shared prioritisation of their own localised identities appropriates and perverts the civil and women's rights movements' desire for racial and gender-based equality, reframing this as an extension of personal liberties instead of universal human rights. Their shared cultural anxieties over the shifting role of white American masculinity re-focuses their dissatisfaction with global capitalism towards those with even fewer societal privileges, rather than the systemic shortcomings themselves.

As a hypocritical expression of revolution, Bateman's expression of advanced capitalist excess contributes to the construction of a contemporary world view that was itself informed by Trump. In doing so, it extends *American Psycho*'s depiction of failure into twenty-first century politics, via the New Right in Trump-era America. What Žižek calls 'the pressure to succeed professionally and the pressure to enjoy life fully in all its intensity' creates a cultural demand for excess that he claims Trump personifies, which Bateman also embodies.[191] It is therefore the continued failure of desire as a revolutionary principle, rather than simply Bateman's idealisation of Trump, that makes *American Psycho* contemporarily relevant. By aligning excessive desire with success in

[189] Mason, *Clear Bright Future*, p. 28.
[190] Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 337.
[191] Slavoj Žižek, *Like a Thief in Broad Daylight: Power in the Era of Post-Humanity* (Milton Keynes: Allen Lane, 2018), p. 202.

a capitalist society, and the impossibility of the majority attaining this, Bateman and Trump represent the only imaginable change. Instead of a radical systemic transformation that seems impossible, they repackage and intensify systemic excess as a pseudo-revolutionary alternative that intensifies and accelerates the very principles it supposedly positions itself against. This rebranding of the status quo as revolutionary change that Bateman, Trump and the New Right embody connects revolutionary potential to repeated failure and the systemic violence of capitalism.

Conclusion

Bateman's inability to actualise radical transformation through violence emphasises the legacy of revolutionary failure, connecting him to postmodern critiques of grand narratives and progress. Ellis claims the cultural narcissism that enabled Bateman to evade capture continues today, and 'illuminates how few things have really changed in American life since the '80s: they've just become more exaggerated, and more accepted.'[192] This is also true of Bateman's disillusionment with a capitalist excess his desire can only momentarily satisfy, intensified by the social dislocation he also experiences. His wealth and status temporarily obscure his dissatisfactions, but ultimately his expressions of desire – violent, revolutionary, or otherwise – fail. This makes Bateman a cypher for political disenfranchisement, providing a postmodern lens that connects the novel to the French Revolution as much as the New Right. The song Fantine sings in *Les Misérables*, 'I Dreamed A Dream,' epitomises this struggle for unachievable transformation – where her crushed hope of a future provides a metaphor for the failures of the French Revolution. This disillusionment with idealism resonates with many of *American Psycho*'s themes, beyond the novel's references to *Les Misérables*. It appears in Bateman's disillusionment with his desire, its implied critique of the schizophrenic process, and the shortcomings of May '68. Likewise, Bateman's violent desire also presents a disillusionment with Fukuyama's end of history, which ultimately failed to resolve the tension between liberty and equality, and its contribution to the contemporary rise of Trump and the New Right.

[192] Ellis, *White*, p. 228.

Therefore, *American Psycho*'s repulsive features dramatise the flaws of advanced capitalism by accelerating them, implying its graphic content should not be read superficially. The novel's subjectification of failed attempts to radically transform entrenched socio-political systems is embodied by Bateman's hallucinatory escapism. His inability to even imagine an alternative results in his replication and intensification of its principles in his quest to produce something new, illustrating the postmodern critique of radical transformation that is similarly extended by accelerationism, Trump and the New Right. The novel's complex and contradictory critique of advanced capitalism reflects this confusion produced by the absence of alternatives. This complexity foregrounds a central component of postmodernism that resonates with twenty-first century culture, and which is a central anxiety in the subsequent chapters. The shift from subjectivity to exteriority results in collective failures to achieve radical transformation, echoed by attempts to revitalise postmodern textual expressions of desire, failed attempts to succeed postmodernism through digital technology, and the politicised function of nostalgic repetitions of postmodernism. The repetition of postmodernism provides a means of articulating this inability to achieve epochal transformation, exemplified by *American Psycho* and extended through the rest of the thesis. This temporal loop connecting the eighties to the contemporary moment suggests this process of repetition has not yet broken, presenting a perpetual absence of alternatives that offers no way out of advanced capitalism. In this respect, the present moment can be viewed as an intensification of eighties American culture, as Ellis claims, connected through the increasing global dominance of capitalism since the publication of *American Psycho*, which the following chapters further evidence.

2. Disillusioned Dreams & Purifying Violence: The Corruption of Collective Action in *Empire of the Senseless* and *Fight Club*

The analysis of purifying violence that follows builds on the previous assessment of politicised violence, extending postmodernism's critique of grand narratives through the intensification of advanced capitalism. Instead of depicting the systemic failures of liberalism and the inability to imagine alternatives to it subjectively, it focuses upon the inability to implement alternatives collectively. Bateman represents systemic and subversive excess, personifying the logical conclusion of advanced capitalism to depict an accelerated disillusionment unable to imagine alternative socio-political systems. The novels interrogated here focus upon collective failures to break away from advanced capitalism, particularly their inability to construct and implement alternatives through purifying violence. Purifying violence is defined as acts of destruction used to destabilise a totalising capitalist framework, clearing a space through these destructive acts in which new alternative grand narratives might be created. Instead of being an end in itself, purifying violence seeks affirmative and constructive ends through its destabilisation of existing power structures, considered here through collective forms of violence. It is distinct from Bateman's violence, which presents destruction as a desirable end point, but repeats a despair with the claustrophobic and inescapable grand narrative of advanced capitalism.

Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) present imagination as a space in which capitalism's claustrophobia can be alleviated, albeit temporarily, though purifying violence. An American constitutional right to liberty is staged in the texts through violent aspirations for social justice. This is depicted through the protagonists' self-identification with terrorism, articulating a desire for alternatives to a totalising capitalist framework through postmodern tropes of marginality, extremity and failure. The characters use violence as a mechanism to produce social transformation, extending beyond the individual to collective action. However, they are only able to destabilise rather than transform the framework they rage against. Ultimately, collective violence is unable to achieve the break from

advanced capitalism these groups desire. Although this imagined violence is corrupted when implemented, the collectively imagined optimism relocates despair in these texts. If *American Psycho* depicts the repeated failure to radically transform or resist the advanced capitalist status quo, these novels present imagination as a productive way of confronting this deadlock. Essentially, by imagining impossible and abstract violent alternatives, Acker and Palahniuk's texts repeat postmodern critiques of grand narratives and progress, but less cynically than Ellis.

Acker and Palahniuk's novels trace a cultural shift underway in America since the eighties. Their external focus upon collective action sees the novels' concerns repeated in twenty-first century discourse on globalisation, locating failure beyond the individual failure depicted in *American Psycho* through Patrick Bateman. Acker's text presents boredom as a revolutionary catalyst, shaped by an inability to dream, which collapses into a post-apocalyptic dystopia of brutal, totalitarian violence. The repetition of oppression in post-revolution Paris presents a collective desire to break away from subjugation as desirable but unrealisable. A collective rejection of advanced capitalism also appears in *Fight Club*'s attempts to produce meaning through violence, which similarly fails to implement or even coherently imagine what might succeed their destructive aims. The group is unable to transfer violence into a successful constructive alternative, despite this being central to the collectives that form in the novel, repeating the collective failures depicted in *Empire of the Senseless*. In both instances, capitalism's destruction can only be imagined rather than realised, connecting a recurring hope for a better future to their failure to achieve it. Imagination provides the only opening in an otherwise closed capitalist framework, reinforced by the novels' failure to break from advanced capitalism through violence. In recognising the failures of violence, these novels position collectively imagined violence as a constructive space that stands in for absent alternatives. I argue imagined violence integrates hope into postmodern cynicism, while also emphasising a shift from subjectivity to exteriority through collective action, illustrating the novels' contemporary cultural currency. Advanced capitalism's continued dominance provides a connecting thread between American postmodernism and twenty-first century culture, foregrounded by analysing the novels' failed attempts to transform advanced capitalism.

Boredom, 'Revolutionary' Dystopias & Learning to Dream

Post-Cold War peace informs American postmodernism's cynicism towards grand narratives, shaping representations of violence that seeks a decisive break from systemic capitalism. Published during the implosion of Soviet communism, Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* marks the beginning of globalised capitalism's dominance. Jeffrey Nealon describes post-postmodernism as 'an intensification and mutation within postmodernism,' driven by the collapse of Soviet communism in the late eighties, which is central to this cultural shift.[193] Acker's novel responds to this historic moment, where America's globalised power permeates even the violent rejection of capitalism. It marks the beginning of this shifting relation to postmodernism, as capitalism becomes entrenched on a more global platform. Nealon describes this shift as a distinction that means 'our "cultural dominant" is no longer that particular brand of "postmodernism, or late capitalism."'[194] Yet, Nealon focuses on a period after postmodernism informed by its intensification. Here, the legacy of postmodernism will be considered through a shift in American postmodern literature – from interiority to exteriority. Both Acker and Palahniuk's novels project American concerns onto a global stage through this post-war expansion of capitalism – either onto transatlantic revolutions, or against international financial networks. They exemplify the entrenched cultural values of postmodernism, specifically its inability to imagine an alternative to advanced capitalism, foregrounding a stylistic shift within American postmodern fiction that responds to this. The overlooked linguistic shift from terrorism to revolution in Acker's novel underpins the complex tension arising from textual representations of collective violence and its failure to transform advanced capitalism. *Empire of the Senseless* mobilises potentially purifying violence through collective action, but fails to produce the systemic changes the revolutionaries imagine, even after taking over Paris.

In Acker's novel, violence facilitates a critical reflection upon the pejorative term terrorism, and the ways it attempts to create a space for new forms of collective power. Initially, Abhor – the part black, part robot protagonist – empathises with terrorism's radical challenge of status quos. The reader is introduced to Abhor indirectly, initially

[193] Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism*, p. ix.
[194] Ibid., p. 15.

through a description of her wealthy German-Jewish grandmother's exile from a pre-Nazi Germany, before focusing on Abhor's abusive relationship with her father. This grounds the novel in violence – both systemic and subjective – from the outset, which adds context to her own reflections upon violence and rebellion. Abhor claims that because 'it is easy enough to kill, terrorism, unlike conventional rebellion, cannot be stopped.'[195] Terrorism is privileged as a perpetual violent systemic challenge that cannot be corrupted or halted, despite being unable to offer an alternative system. This responds to the systemic violence of totalitarianism and patriarchy, experienced in both a personal and familial sense, through a collective dissent that seeks accomplices to produce its own violence. The purity of terrorism's violence is reliant upon collective action, but seemingly cannot achieve radial transformation without expanding into a revolution. By drawing upon these transatlantic references, Acker locates a resistance to America's expansion through advanced capitalism on a global scale, where textual violence creates a space to consider possible alternatives to its totalising ideological dominance.

The end of the Cold War brought about a period of relative peace, combining the successes of Ronald Reagan's deregulated capitalism with communism no longer being viewed as *the* threat to American culture. Michael Schaller argues, 'Millions of Americans, consciously or unconsciously, looked to Reagan to restore the security of that "lost world."'[196] If true, this was achieved partly through the expansion and success of advanced capitalism. Reagan capitalised upon America's resentment over losing the Vietnam War and declining economic prosperity to implement a new era of right wing politics, prioritising individual freedom, tax cuts, and the dominance of market forces.[197] As Aaron Wildavsky claims, Reagan's success 'shifted the entire debate in an economically conservative direction' for both parties.[198] The expansion of a more

[195] Kathy Acker, *Empire of the Senseless* (London: Picador, 1989), p. 76.
[196] Michael Schaller, *Reckoning with Reagan: America and Its President in the 1980s*. (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 51.
[197] Dilys M. Hill & Phil Williams, 'Introduction', in *The Reagan Presidency: An Incomplete Revolution?*, ed. by Dilys M. Hill, Raymond A. Moore and Phil Williams (Hampshire & London: Macmillan Press, 1990), pp. 3-25, (pp. 4, 11).
[198] Aaron Wildavsky, 'President Reagan as a Political Strategist', in *The Reagan Legacy: Promise and Performance*, ed. by Charles O. Jones (New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, 1988), pp. 289-305, (p. 290).

ruthless model of advanced capitalism arose at the precise moment that it lacked clear political opposition, reinforcing the value placed upon imagination in Acker's text and its connection to twenty-first century culture.

Empire of the Senseless confronts the peace brought about by capitalism's success through the radicalisation of boredom. Bertrand Russell claims 'Boredom is essentially a thwarted desire for events,' inferring a connection to failed action.[199] Boredom can be viewed therefore as a response to the absence of change, where repetition generates a monotony that underpins a continued desire of a transformative act that has yet to be realised. This is reflected in the novel, where Abhor specifically cites a connection between boredom, violence, and an inability to even constructively imagine what a radical break from advanced capitalism might look like. Early in the novel, Abhor distances terrorism from a purely class-based motivation, suggesting: 'Perhaps it isn't poverty but boredom which creates terrorists. Boredom is the lack of dreams.'[200] For her, boredom stems from a disenfranchisement with a booming capitalist economy during and after the collapse of Soviet communism. This becomes a central motivation in her violent desire to destabilise the dominant advanced capitalist framework. Russell's claim that boredom has been 'one of the great motive powers throughout the historical epoch' reinforces this claim when applied to Abhor's experience.[201] However, alongside the shift from personal to collective motivation that occurs in the application of Russell's definition of boredom to Acker's novel, one further and more significant distinction remains. Where Russell's definition implicitly presents boredom as a productive force, for Abhor it is intrinsically connected to both a failure to imagine alternatives, and subsequently a failure to break from systemic capitalism through violence.

Boredom instigates Abhor's self-identification with terrorism, where hope in an unimaginable break is attempted through destructive acts of collective violence. Lars Svendsen finds a potential within boredom, suggesting 'It can open ways up for a new configuration of things, and therefore also for a new meaning, by virtue of the fact that it

[199] Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 36.
[200] Acker, *Empire of the Senseless*, p. 58.
[201] Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness*, p. 35.

has already deprived things of meaning.'[202] Yet, he more explicitly connects boredom to violence, particularly nihilism, claiming: 'The chaos and violence is what moves one from boredom to life, awakening oneself. Providing life with some sort of meaning.'[203] This is similarly relevant to Acker's novel, where boredom awakens the characters to the deadlock of advanced capitalism. In line with Abhor's definition of terrorism, apathy rather than economic inequality underpins the violent outbursts of the Parisian dissidents, responding to the post-Cold War culture of prosperity and peace that accompanied capitalism's global expansion. In the novel, boredom is created by the absence of dreams or imagined alternatives. This makes prosperity instrumental in a claustrophobia imposed by advanced capitalism, and the violent responses to this deadlock. If 'boredom is a positive source of human development, though not necessarily of progress' as Svendsen claims, this change without progress resonates with Abhor's postmodern depiction of terrorism in a pre-World Trade Centre and Oklahoma bombing climate.[204] The transformative potential aligned with a pure violence means Abhor reclaims the pejorative term 'terrorist' for its perpetual ability to destabilise institutional power that, unlike more conventional forms of rebellion, cannot be corrupted. Violence arising from boredom responds to the inability to imagine alternatives to capitalism's dominance. In the novel, destruction hopes for a break that remains unimaginable, aligning terrorism with a postmodern cynicism towards radical transformation.

The novel re-situates its violence against capitalism by replacing overt references to the Cold War with a European colonial past connected to terrorism. The text traces a linguistic shift from terrorism to revolution after the successful Algerian occupation of Paris, emphasising the significance of both terroristic violence and the language used to describe it. Christina Milletti suggests 'terrorism is never a stable term' for Acker, but does not explicitly discuss the significance of this ambiguity, particularly in relation to postmodern cynicism towards the failure to break from systemic capitalism through

[202] Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 142.
[203] Ibid., p. 38.
[204] Ibid., p. 41.

collective action.[205] The fluidity of the term terrorism resonates with postmodern tendencies to problematise and blur defined boundaries. Specifically, its connection to a pure but dreamless violence subverts its conventional use, informing the novel's cynicism towards a decisive break from capitalism's framework.

Allusions to an inverted Algerian Revolution in the novel are supported by a reversal of the conception of terrorism, which is given positive connotations. For Thivai, Abhor's accomplice, terrorism 'is always a place to start because one has to start somewhere.'[206] Similarly, Abhor claims 'revolutions usually begin by terrorism,' making terrorism a precursor to potentially changing existing social inadequacies.[207] This shift in emphasis raises postmodern questions about language-based power dynamics, and who controls the narrative that defines violent figures as terrorists or freedom fighters. As Margaret Scanlan suggests:

> In practice, to call people terrorists is to condemn them; those of whom we approve are, of course, soldiers, liberators, partisans, freedom fighters, or revolutionaries; even *guerilla* [sic] remains more neutral.[208]

The novel foregrounds the subjective interpretations of violence by inverting and reclaiming terrorism as a positive term. Comparatively, revolution is presented negatively, as a corruption of terrorism's pure destabilisation of power through violence. This is because, in achieving power, it is unable to coherently implement terrorism's destabilisation, which lacks an alternative model, and is therefore unable to successfully escape capitalism's dominance. By inverting the conventional values ascribed to terroristic and revolutionary violence, Acker's novel prioritises a marginality and cynicism towards potential systemic change, privileging imagination in the process.

There is no celebration when the Algerian terrorists take over Paris, since it offers a minimal difference to the society it succeeded. Cynicism informs Abhor's response to revolutionary success, which is contrasted to her prioritisation of terrorism:

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[205] Christina Milletti, 'Violent Acts, Volatile Words: Kathy Acker's Terrorist Aesthetic', *Studies in the Novel*, 36 (3) (2004), 352-373 (p. 356).
[206] Acker, *Empire of the Senseless*, p. 35.
[207] Ibid., p. 75.
[208] Margaret Scanlan, *Plotting Terror: Novelists and Terrorists in Contemporary Fiction*. (Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 2001), p. 6.

‘The Algerian revolution had succeeded. Whatever political success is worth.’[209] The revolution is not successful simply for replicating the system it overthrew, it must also achieve a systemic change, hence why Abhor finds no value in its successful usurpation of power. Hannah Arendt suggests ‘the end of rebellion is liberation, while the end of revolution is the foundation of freedom.’[210] Yet, in Acker’s novel the dissidents’ liberation produces little more than a dystopia that perpetuates the same problems, providing a false revolution because it produces no new forms of freedom. The textual investment in a potential violent break from capitalist structures remains detached from Abhor’s experience, privileging its retained vitality, even in the face of the uprising’s failure. The rebellion’s violence, by contrast, is more closely aligned with Arendt’s description of rage which is ‘impotent by definition,’ and that amounts to little more than futile expressions of ‘the last stage of final despair.’[211] A perpetually destabilising violence replaces this failure to break from advanced capitalism in the novel, via a postmodern subversion of totalising power structures. This is why Abhor aligns terrorism’s destructive violence with marginality, claiming: ‘The Algerian revolution had changed nothing. There is always a reason for nihilism.’[212] Terrorism provides a way of bypassing this corruption by remaining a perpetually destructive and violent force that cannot attain power and therefore cannot be corrupted. Even Abhor’s name reflects this conflict, representing both a perpetual abhorrence of corrupted systemic power, and a normalisation that neutralises this loathing, structurally integrating it as a proper noun. The novel’s critique of systemic control contrasts a hopeful investment in marginal groups’ violence, via a cynicism towards the possibility of producing a decisive break from capitalism’s mechanisms.

The text’s connection to the Algerian Revolution reinforces capitalism’s dominance through the reabsorption of violence into its systemic framework. David Shalk notes a scholarly consensus that the Algerian War masked concerns in French society linked to the free market and consumption, which were felt in ‘full force’ once

[209] Acker, *Empire of the Senseless*, p. 109.
[210] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), p. 140.
[211] Ibid., p. 107.
[212] Ibid., p. 110.

this crisis had been resolved.[213] Likewise, in Acker's novel, violent tensions mask capitalism's social dominance, despite the apparent success of the Parisian take-over. The revolution created an environment where, as Thivai describes, 'money wasn't anything,' replacing the economic core of capitalism with revolutionary chaos.[214] Yet, this destabilisation only superficially transforms the post-revolutionary framework, since systemic instability ultimately provides a re-entry point of capitalism. From the outset, the institutionalisation of terrorism's violence intensifies pre-existing forms of systemic violence, accelerating rather than succeeding these problematic parameters. What Abhor calls the 'post-apocalyptic mess' continues to perpetuate forms of patriarchal oppression in post-revolutionary Paris, resulting in her seeking out untainted marginal communities that provide viable forms of pure resistance.[215] The absence of dreams that informs terroristic violence is translated into a revolutionary absence of alternatives to the system that is overthrown. The systemic disruption of violent terrorism, informed by an absence of dreams combined with boredom, becomes the absence of new possibilities when it transforms into a systemically impactful revolution.

The novel focuses on violence as a perpetually destabilising force that retains its vitality by refusing complete structural integration. This is significant within a history of French and American imperialism, where the Algerian and Vietnam conflicts undermined dominant structures of power, even if only temporarily. As Houari Boumediène suggests, 'Even the United States of America is not an invincible power,' evidenced during the Vietnam war, comparable to France during the Algerian Revolution.[216] Yet, this challenge to Western superpowers has no positive collective outcome in Acker's novel. Instead, it produces a dystopian, post-apocalyptic society that Laura McCaffery likens to a 'Sadean future,' but which she does not fully unpack within its histo-political context.[217] The reference to the Marquis de Sade here evokes an extreme dramatisation of socio-political power dynamics through representations of

[213] David L. Shalk, *War and the Ivory Tower: Algeria and Vietnam*. (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), p. 95.
[214] Acker, *Empire of the Senseless*, p. 141.
[215] Ibid., p. 109.
[216] Houari Boumediène, 'The Future of the Algerian Revolution', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 6 (3) (1968), 425-439 (p. 435).
[217] Laura McCaffery, 'Kathy Acker: Always Missing – A Plagiarized Tribute', *Critiques*, 51 (2010), 104-111 (p. 107).

violent sexual extremity. The torture of Abhor combines references to BDSM with the French torture of Algerians during their quest for colonial emancipation. For example, when Thivai and Mark return to Abhor in prison she 'was so happy to see us she pissed in her pants.'[218] This adds an elation with implied sexual undertones to the Sadean systematic degradation linked to Abhor's torture, replicating historical forms of oppression within this newly emancipated post-revolutionary environment. The text also intertwines references to violence, limbs and freedom that extend Abhor's dehumanisation through forms of loss. This is exemplified when Mark suggests 'the safest thing to do would be to saw off one of Abhor's legs,' before deciding it would be better for Abhor to do it herself, integrating the allusion of empowerment into the scene's violence.[219] The scene alludes to the Algerian Revolution partly because, as Neil Macmaster notes, 'the issue of torture had been central to the debate on the Algerian war from the very beginning,' exemplified by Henri Alleg's account of such events in *The Question*.[220] Torture, which was used in Algeria by the French, despite state torture being abolished after the French Revolution in 1789, reinforces the novel's connection to both Sade and the Algerian Revolution through violence.[221] Yet, in Acker's novel, torture also draws upon patriarchal and political subjugation because Abhor is imprisoned by Thivai and Mark, via the CIA, and tortured to turn her into 'a great writer' through suffering.[222] Abhor's torture challenges notions of progress by connecting barbarism to the contemporary, reinforcing the novel's connection to postmodern cynicism through the failures of the dissidents to produce a new and better society.

The revolution not only fails to transform internal societal power structures but also remains dominated by American capitalism. The subjugated people have their oppression reinforced on micro and macro levels, via an inescapable advanced capitalism and descriptions of counter-intuitive voting behaviour. While 'One would

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[218] Acker, *Empire of the Senseless*, p. 201.
[219] Ibid., p. 200.
[220] Neil Macmaster, 'The Torture Controversy (1998-2002): Towards a 'New History' of the Algerian War?', *Modern & Contemporary France*, 10 (4) (2002), 449-459 (p.449); Henri Alleg, *The Question*, trans. by John Calder (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).
[221] Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962* (London: Macmillan London Limited, 1977), p. 196.
[222] Acker, *Empire of the Senseless*, p. 203.

expect the disenfranchised to revolt against the rich and the bosses,' instead it was what is called the 'no-class stagnation' in American 'who put Reagan, for instance, in power and gave way fully to Multi-Nationals.'[223] Violent discontent is recaptured, reinforcing their oppression through the succeeding power structure. Revolution therefore masks oppression instead of formulating coherent societal alternatives, offering little more than a covert power shift that deceives the most vulnerable. This distrust of an ability to succeed globalised capitalism through political revolution informs the texts positioning of terrorism's perpetually vital and destabilising violence.

The perversion of revolutionary violence is exemplified by the pervasive presence of American power in post-revolution Paris. Initially, Thivai claims CIA agents had not heard about the revolution, exclaiming 'Praise Allah for the Americans' ignorance.'[224] However, the CIA's need for new chemical testing subjects makes post-revolution Paris 'the perfect drug-testing ground' for their experiments.[225] Subsequently, as Thivai explains, 'though the Algerians had taken over Paris, the American CIA still ran everything.'[226] The word 'still' implies the revolution was simply a smokescreen, masking rather than breaking from capitalist power structures. This contradicts Thivai's previous statement: 'before there had been a revolution and then the CIA had taken over everything.'[227] Paradoxically, this implies the CIA should have been aware of the revolution if they were already in control of Paris, since their power would have been rescinded when the Algerians took over. Yet, perhaps Thivai simply linguistically conflates implicit and explicit forms of American dominance. America's implicit global cultural dominance is distinct from the explicit dominance that occurs in post-revolution Paris, foregrounding this repeated power dynamic through the Sadean extremity McCaffery notes.

The novel's cynicism towards systemic progress presents revolutionary violence as commodified. This prioritisation of more marginal forms of politicised violence echoes Bateman's individual rage. Yet, it is distinguished by the more overt references to

[223] Ibid., p. 124.
[224] Ibid., p. 143.
[225] Ibid., p. 144.
[226] Ibid., p. 198
[227] Ibid., p. 202.

community *Empire of the Senseless* draws upon through terroristic violence. The character of Mr Williams, a businessman in the novel, reinforces this tension between revolution and capitalism by presenting revolution as a mechanism for capitalist expansion. He calls the Algerian Revolution stupid because of its violence, but asserts that any revolution is 'good for business,' irrespective of its aims, because death 'means disruption.'[228] Interestingly, this instability provides an opportunity for 'the creation of new markets,' aligning destabilisation with the capitalist system the rebellion sought to overthrow.[229] Mr Williams' cynical depiction of revolution's intertwinement with capitalism's expansion reiterates the apparent impossibility of escape. Like the replication of pre-revolutionary power dynamics, even revolution furthers capitalism's need for new markets. This ultimately makes it complicit with capitalism, despite its rejection of it. The revolution's social transformation is ultimately facile – partly because of the continued patriarchal oppression, but also because the CIA take over to further their chemical testing and develop new products for the free market. Although money becomes superfluous in post-revolution Paris, rejecting capitalism on a micro level, the revolution is unable to sustain a break from capitalism on a macro level. The reintroduction of capitalist dominance into Paris infers a need for perpetually violent destabilisation of power; one which creates a possibility to attain an as yet unrealised transformation through violence.

The disillusionment Acker's characters face with the revolution's limited success leads Abhor and Thivai to seek out other outlaw groups to retain the potential vitality of violence. These groups' criminality plays a central role in the novel, as exemplified by Acker's recurring depiction of pirates, which Michael Clune suggests is *her* 'revolutionary subject.'[230] Acker's presentation of marginal violence as perpetually vibrant is problematic because it prioritises destruction in the hope it is able to produce a creative space for a break she undermines in advance. This creates a paradoxical tension that also implicitly undermines the purifying potential of violence by making it redundant before it can even be corrupted. Either it is successful enough to expand and

[228] Ibid., p. 182.
[229] Ibid.
[230] Michael Clune, 'Blood Money: Sovereignty and Exchange in Kathy Acker', *Contemporary Literature*, 45 (3) (2004), 486-515 (p.487).

inevitably replicate the status quo, which could be repeated indefinitely, or it remains marginal, preserving its vitality but making its impact systemically negligible. Communities are formed around this investment in purifying violence, but when it cannot be successfully realised in its purest form, marginality is integrally connected to textual representations of construction. Richard House's claim that *Empire of the Senseless* exemplifies a 'new aesthetic' in Acker's writing 'directed by deliberate, positive aims' is therefore thrown into question.[231] Undoubtedly, the novel relies upon more sustained prose than her earlier works, offering a more constructive rather than fragmented textual form. The novel's investment in the potential of purifying violence seemingly supports this positivity, prioritising the eventual construction of a new society over the more immediate forms of destruction. Yet, construction is limited in its scope, localising the desired break from capitalism in provincial forms of community, rather than producing a realisable systemic alternative.

The potential of marginal violence is reinforced through the novel's allusions to communism. By referencing Che Guevara instead of Russia, the text prioritises violence connected to guerrilla tactics used in both Cuba and the Algerian Revolution.[232] This distinction between guerrilla – or terrorist – and revolutionary violence is reinforced by Thivai's suggestion that 'Ché could only dwell in dreams.'[233] The evocation of Guevara partly positions Cuba against an increasingly fragile Soviet bloc, emphasising the continuing potential of social transformation through communism. Most notably, Guevara intertwines the iconic spirit of transformation he symbolises with the commodification of his image. This contradiction foregrounds a distinction between purifying forms of destabilising violence and their corruption through expansion. The novel therefore positions imagination as an untainted space where violent disruption of systemic inadequacies can be collectively imagined, responding to the boredom of advanced capitalism's dominance and the difficulties of imagining alternatives to it.

Despite their differing relations to dreams, boredom and Guevara are connected through marginal and disruptive forms of violence in the novel. Fundamentally, they are

[231] Richard House, 'Informational Inheritance in Kathy Acker's "Empire of the Senseless"', *Contemporary Literature*, 46 (3) (2005), 450-482 (p.461).
[232] Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 166.
[233] Acker, *Empire of the Senseless*, p. 167.

only able to escape the status quo by refusing to be absorbed in a pre-existing system. Yet, they also refuse to implement an alternative system in the power vacuum created by a revolutionary *coup d'état*, like the futuristic Parisian dystopia. The suggestion that Guevara lives on only for those 'Driven into dream' presents him as an inspirational figure for those looking to escape into the imaginary.[234] However, this is not entirely accurate. This is clearest when the unnamed female Arab poses the question, 'What good are dreams when you're stuck in prison?'[235] While apparently referring to Abhor's torture, it also reinforces the need for this process of potential purification not to be entirely detached from materiality, despite its potential corruption. The cynicism towards both dreams and new political systems combines the postmodern critiques of dominant power structures, progress, and failed purification through the novel's representations of violence.

Abhor's torture reinforces her disillusionment with the revolution, leading her to seek out increasingly marginal communities where violence can remain systemically disruptive. Yet, even these outlaw communities only function contradictorily and in isolation. They replicate the failures of the Parisian revolution on a smaller scale, perpetuating the systemic power structures they seek to escape. Only when Abhor and Thivai integrate into actual outlaw communities, specifically pirates, do their shortcomings become clearer. Before the revolution failed, Thivai claims, 'As long as I can remember, I have wanted to be a pirate,' making their prioritised status comparable to terrorists in the text.[236] The improbability of Thivai becoming a pirate aligns them with imagined forms of violence repeated throughout the text, and their attempts to destabilise or resist advanced capitalism's dominance.

Piracy's association with criminality informs both its connection to violence and to the construction of an identity otherwise denied to Abhor: 'I was no longer nothing. I was now on my way to being somebody. A criminal.'[237] Despite an unnamed male Arab claiming America is 'devoid of dreams' in the novel, the violent outlaw is a recurring motif within American culture – from the cowboys of the Western Frontier to the

[234] Ibid.
[235] Ibid.
[236] Ibid., p. 20.
[237] Ibid., p. 120.

countercultural road trippers of *Easy Rider*, Rambo in *First Blood* and the protagonists of *Natural Born Killers*, amongst innumerable others.[238] In each instance, the outlaw figure constructs their own codes of ethics, asserting their identity by opposing legal, moral and cultural norms, leading them to live on the fringes of society. This combination of revolutionary construction and individualism, embodied by the Myth of the Frontier, is central to American identity. Richard Slotkin claims 'the Myth represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation.'[239] For Lee Spinks, this abstract sense of liberation provides an emancipatory doctrine that 'must be reconstructed in each new time and place,' which Acker's novel draws upon.[240] An abstract evocation of progress, instigated by Puritan colonisation, and repeated in Jeffersonian democratic freedoms, and then Jacksonian patriotism and self-made fortunes, is continued by Abhor's personal quest for freedom.[241] Each of these examples of the Frontier Myth, as Slotkins suggests, 'relates the achievement of "progress" to a particular form or scenario of violent action.'[242] Abhor's desire for progress focuses upon succeeding globalised capitalism through collective expressions of violence, where failure undermines the possibility of either progress or a decisive break from systemic capitalism.

Abhor represents Acker's inversion of John F. Kennedy's use of the Frontier Myth, exemplified by the polarised enemies of the heroic, individualistic freedom they depict. Slotkins described how Kennedy drew upon the Frontier Myth 'to summon the nation as a whole to undertake (or at least support) a *heroic* engagement in the "long twilight struggle" against Communism.'[243] By contrast, Acker's evocation depicts Abhor's struggle against an inescapable capitalism, appropriating a myth of progress to partly undermine it. The novel's representations of failed collective violence confronts an inescapable global capitalist framework that inhibits the possibility of breaking away

[238] Ibid., p. 167; *Easy Rider*, dir., by. Dennis Hopper (Columbia Pictures, 1969); *First Blood*, dir., by. Ted Kotcheff (Orion Pictures, 1982); *Natural Born Killers*, dir., by. Oliver Stone (Warner Bros., 1994).
[239] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), p. 12.
[240] Lee Spinks, 'Jefferson at the Millennial Gates: History and Apocalypse in the Fiction of Steve Erickson', *Contemporary Literature*, 40 (2) (1999), pp. 214-239 (p. 221).
[241] Slotkins, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 11-12.
[242] Ibid., p. 11.
[243] Ibid., p. 3.

from it. Abhor's rejection of capitalism necessarily makes her an outlaw, as her attempts to circumvent it to assert her individual freedom drives her away from civilised and metropolitan society. Her attempts to construct an identity as a woman in patriarchal society, and as an individual seeking to escape the totalising force of global capitalism, repeats the founding myths of American identity construction but in ways that position her outside American society. The outlaw thus connects Abhor and Thivai to both the text's purifying marginal violence and to a symbol of American independence, via their own subjectivity.

This connection between female identity and criminality also reinforces Abhor's connection to the Algerian Revolution. Alistair Horne notes how female terrorists played a notable role in the Algerian Revolution because their femininity meant 'they could pass where a male terrorist could not.'[244] Yet, in Acker's novel Abhor's femininity excludes her from these outlaw spaces, where she dresses as a man to blend in, imposing patriarchal restrictions upon her comparable to wider society. Subsequently, she aligns this desire to be a pirate with the existing patriarchal power structures that inhibit her identity creation, suggesting:

> Thivai decided he was going to be a pirate. Therefore: we were going to be pirates. If I didn't want to be a pirate, I had to be a victim. Because, if I didn't want to be a pirate, I was rejecting all that he is. He, then, had to make me either repent my rejection or too [sic] helplessly reject him.[245]

Pirates provide an ostracised group defined by symbolic violence, which makes them appealing in a comparable way to terrorists for Abhor. Yet, they also represent movement or adventure, symbolising a process of discovery through travel comparable to the American outlaws. Abhor appropriates the male form to integrate into this outlaw group, connecting transformation to postmodern pastiche. Nevertheless, this proves to be a superficial transformation, reinforcing the failures that play out in the novel. The outlaws, specifically here pirates, subsequently replicate the societal oppression Abhor sought to circumvent, like the Parisian revolution she attempts to escape, undermining a search for autonomy through the outsider groups she hoped would enable it.

[244] Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, p. 185.
[245] Acker, *Empire of the Senseless*, p. 210.

The outlaw communities' failure to challenge systemic oppression pushes Abhor to seek a marginal position where she can assert her autonomy. Instead of forming alternative communities, Abhor amplifies their detachment from mainstream society through her eventual isolation. Her empowerment is realised when she acquires a motorbike in the closing chapter, providing an allegory for the novel's references to power and violence through the freedom it offers her. She is told 'you are perfectly free to ride a bike even if you don't have a clue how to ride,' making rules and knowledge structures secondary to her autonomy.[246] This is reinforced when she tears out the first section of *The Highway Code* and 'tossed it into a ditch,' rejecting conventions and replacing them with an affirmative relation to power she constructs herself.[247] Abhor gains an individualistic freedom through her motorbike, comparable to the freedom derived from travel and adventure connected to the American outlaw figure exemplified by *Easy Rider*, which is extended and amplified here. This extends the values she found in the pirate community – of freedom through movement and violence – but reduces it from the collective to the individual, leaving behind any sense of community previously connected to the outlaw in the novel.

Yet, even this individualism, like the purifying violence it succeeds, cannot provide Abhor with the absolute freedom she desires. Instead, liberation is again replaced by dismay, this time focused upon the confusion of 'what was happening because there were no more rules.'[248] Abhor is unable to implement the rules of *The Highway Code*, but also unable to orientate herself without them. Therefore, rejection becomes as problematic as tacit acceptance:

> The problem with following the rules is that, if you follow rules, you don't follow yourself. Therefore, rules prevent, dement, and even kill the people who follow them. To ride a dangerous machine, or an animal or human, by following rules, is suicidal. Disobeying rules is the same as following rules cause it's necessary to listen to your own heart.[249]

[246] Ibid., p. 212.
[247] Ibid., p. 213.
[248] Ibid., p. 218.
[249] Ibid., p. 219.

This results in Abhor deciding to begin 'making up the rules,' attempting to circumvent this binary entrapment, as she tries to navigate and orientate herself within this new landscape.[250] Nicola Pitchford argues that Acker 'suggests that conventional modes of authority – and therefore, of resistance – no longer pertain to postmodernity,' implicitly presenting it as a way out of the binary deadlock Abhor describes.[251] However, instead, postmodern strategies represented in the novel are central to a new and more pervasive deadlock. The cynicism towards breaking away from systemic capitalism through revolutionary violence and an overinvestment in marginality – even a constructive one – offers no collective strategy for systemic change. Abhor's affirmative and creative individualism at best obscures this point, since the only way she can escape oppression is through complete isolation. Her actions therefore reflect a libertarian individualism that leaves behind the transformative qualities of purifying violence and collective action, reaffirming that such a radical break remains imaginary.

Imagination provides a counterpoint to the text's otherwise unrelenting cynicism towards this potential break through collective violence. Alex Houen's description of the 'more positive literary potentialism' in Acker's later work can be upheld, but not necessarily because of the connection between the body and dreams he describes.[252] Instead, dreams are largely disconnected from the material, reinforcing the impossibility of materially achieving the change Abhor and others imagine, but fail to collectively actualise. This is echoed through the connection between dreams and violence, where the potential of violence for change is contrasted with its physical manifestations within the novel. Similarly, the 'move from critique to mythmaking' that Arthur Redding notes through textual references to masochism and tattooing can overstate the affirmative qualities of *Empire of the Senseless*.[253] The most interesting forms of construction – purifying violence and collective action – are left behind at the end of the novel. The affirmative qualities Redding describes pertain to Abhor's individualism, and not the

[250] Ibid., p.222.
[251] Nicola Pitchford, *Tactical Readings: Feminist Postmodernism in the Novels of Kathy Acker and Angela Carter* (London: Bucknell University Press, 2002), p. 93.
[252] Alex Houen, *Powers of Possibility: Experimental American Writing Since The 1960s* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 149.
[253] Arthur Redding, 'Bruises, Roses: Masochism and the Writing of Kathy Acker', *Contemporary Literature*, 35 (2) (1994), 281-304 (p.294).

collective constructive possibilities the novel begins with. Nevertheless, Abhor's ability to dream again in the closing lines of the text return to both as imagined possibilities, suggesting their failure and her isolation are not necessarily an absolute end point.

Abhor's attempts to make up the rules only perpetuates her isolation, and cannot be translated into communities or revolutionary platforms, but inform her imaginative creativity. Hope is placed in the possibility of construction, but is undermined whenever it is attempted, emphasising the prioritisation of imagination over physicality as a viable site of transformation. In the closing lines of the novel, Acker hints at these tenuous creative possibilities through Abhor's potential ability to dream again:

> I stood there in the sunlight, and thought that I didn't as yet know what I wanted. I now fully knew what I didn't want and what and whom I hated. That was something.
> And then I thought that, one day, maybe, there'ld [sic] be a human society in a world which is beautiful, a society which wasn't just disgust.[254]

Her ability to dream suggests the constructive possibilities of imagination, contrasted against the failures of revolution and resistance represented in the novel. Similarly, Jake Kennedy describes Acker becoming 'much more suspicious of deconstruction' in this period, though the nature of construction should be further interrogated.[255] In contrast to boredom, where an absence of dreams facilitated the Algerian occupation of Paris, Abhor's isolation informs her ability to imagine alternative futures. Yet, in both instances the inability to break from systemic capitalism is foregrounded: either through the revolution's collective failure, or Abhor's rejection of inadequate community formations. Each emphasises a distinct connection to construction, either socially or imaginatively, but neither is practically achievable. The increasing marginality of Abhor's relationship to violence continues to position imagination as a creative space, but as one that supplements these failures through unformulated possibilities, rather than a constructive model of realisable transformation.

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[254] Acker, *Empire of the Senseless*, p. 227.
[255] Jake Kennedy, '"But who is any longer interested in the possible?" Kathy Acker in Hell Failing Fuck You' *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture*, 5 (1) (2005) <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/Issues/051/kennedy.shtml> [accessed 4th May 2015].

Imagination is a central motivator for Abhor and her desire to break away from systemic oppression, which is informed by boredom, violence and freedom. The emphasis upon construction and creative affirmation seemingly challenge postmodernism's cynicism towards grand narratives, progress and radical transformation. Nevertheless, this distinctly more optimistic image of change – than, say, *American Psycho* – masks the implied message of Acker's novel. The text suggests that the failure of previous alternatives to advanced capitalism – reactionary or otherwise – should not detract from future attempts to imagine new ones, despite being doomed to failure. When purifying violence and an overinvestment in marginality are unable to offer practically implementable change for Abhor, they emphasise a distinction between the possible and the imaginable. Even the imaginative possibilities they open up, much like a Derridian double-bind, remain tied to the impossibility of fully formulating, or practically implementing them. In this respect, the text is quintessentially postmodern, but in a way that resonates with the contemporary moment: through the impossibility of superseding advanced capitalism's dominance. Like in *American Psycho*, the inability to escape capitalism is central to *Empire of the Senseless*. Yet, unlike Bateman, Abhor represents a hope of breaking away from a capitalist framework through collective destabilising violence, even if this can only remain an imagined possibility. The distinction may be a subtle one, especially when Abhor eventually prioritises individual freedom over the collective. Nevertheless, it emphasises a more direct attempt to represent collective change through violence in Acker's novel that can only be inferred in the rampant individualised violence of Bateman in Ellis' text. Overall, *Empire of the Senseless* positions imagination as central to instigating collective action through violence, making construction and possibility a necessary component of its textual depictions of failure.

Radicalised Disenfranchisement & Failed Alternatives

Fight Club is comparable to Acker's text in its use of violence to destabilise advanced capitalism. Palahniuk's depiction of white male aggression more overtly echoes Bateman's actions than Abhor's oppression (despite the obvious class distinctions).

Nevertheless, *Fight Club* resonates with the underlying ethos of *Empire of the Senseless* in its account of collective action. As Henry Giroux states, 'Tyler represents the redemption of masculinity repackaged as the promise of violence in the interests of social and political anarchy.'[256] Giroux infers the purifying qualities of violence through male bonding positioned against consumer capitalism, but prioritises masculinity over failure in his analysis of textual violence. Although hyper-masculine violence is positioned against a supposedly effeminised consumerist culture, it cannot produce a decisive break from capitalism. The failure to succeed advanced capitalism in Acker's novel locates this desired break in the characters' imagination, specifically dreams. However, in contrast to the external Algerian force in Acker's novel, the white working class males of Palahniuk's text are, as Per Petersen suggests, an 'enemy within.'[257] In contrast to Petersen, who presents *Fight Club* as a prescient vision of the September 11th attacks, postmodern violence is considered as a continual way of imagining destabilisation. Here, violence stands in for an inability to escape from consumer capitalism, which is repeated in twenty-first century American culture. Collective ritualistic violence stands against consumer capitalism and individual impotence, but fails to offer either systemic transformation or purification.

The failure of collective violence to transform advanced capitalism reflects both the novel's connection to postmodernism in literary scholarship and also its contemporary relevance. Tyler and the unnamed Narrator's attempt to reclaim the pejorative term terrorist, presenting themselves as 'guerrilla terrorists' through their subversive, anarchic and violent acts is not necessarily radically leftist.[258] However, when read as a leftist text, the toxic masculine traits represent dystopian forms of collective violence – specifically a self-identification with terrorism – rather than a blueprint for revolution. Andrew Slade presents a regressive view of *Fight Club*'s violence, claiming it 'turns adolescent rebellion into heroic action,' considering Project Mayhem's actions 'just pranks inflated to the grand and spectacular scale of a

[256] Henry A. Giroux, 'Brutalised Bodies and Emasculated Politics', *Third Text*, 14 (53) (2000), 31-41 (p.34).
[257] Per S. Petersen, '9/11 and the 'Problem of Imagination': *Fight Club* and *Glamorama* as Terrorist Pretexts', *Orbis Litterarum*, 60 (2005), 133-144 (p.137).
[258] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 81.

Hollywood movie.'[259] Yet, this approach overlooks the increasing seriousness of the group's collective discontent, and the significance of their identification with terrorists. Paulo Palladino and Teresa Young also focus on terrorism, connecting *Fight Club* to the September 11th attacks, suggesting 'its narrative draws attention to many of the geo-political issues raised in the aftermath of the attacks on New York and Washington.'[260] While I also connect the novel to twenty-first century culture through violence, I prioritise the contemporary relevance of postmodernism and the revolutionary failures of the left through this connection.

Here, violence is read as expressions of failed collective action, foregrounding a hope for leftist alternatives within postmodern texts. James Annesley reads Durden as 'an individual looking to take a step back in time,' sharing a focus upon a deadlock posed by advanced capitalism, but prioritising gendered regression over repetitions of postmodernism.[261] He connects Durden's desire for destruction to traditional masculine stereotypes, where 'The implication is that real men aspire to things not commodities.'[262] Annesley's emphasis upon the connection between traditional masculinity and countercultural movements in *Fight Club* underpins the novel's influence upon the contemporary alt-right, which Angela Nagle interrogates.[263] This contemporary relevance of the text is continued here through an analysis of repetitions of postmodernism, connecting the text to leftist critiques of advanced capitalism. Although Durden's actions are discredited both here and by Annesley, I extend the leftist reading of *Fight Club*, but shift the focus from masculinity to collective violence. My reading reconsiders this desire to 'leave only wilderness' as an example of affirmative nihilism, rather than conventional masculinity, connecting this reading more overtly to the legacy of postmodernism.[264] In contrast, Omar Lizardo recognises what he calls 'a more *constructive* vision of a radical solution to alleviate its aporias' within the

[259] Andrew Slade, 'To Live Like Fighting Cocks: Fight Club and the Ethics of Masculinity', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 28 (3) (2011), 230-238 (p.238).
[260] Paulo Palladino & Teresa Young, 'Fight Club and the World Trade Center: On Metaphor, Scale, and the Spatio-temporal (Dis)location of Violence', *Journal of Cultural Research*, 7 (2) (2003), 195-218 (p.197).
[261] Annesley, *Fictions of Globalization*, p. 46.
[262] Ibid.
[263] Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, pp. 30, 114-116.
[264] Annesley, *Fictions of Globalization*, p. 46.

novel, comparable to the active nihilism discussed here.[265] Yet, he connects it to the deconstruction of individuals' masculinity rather than collective action, prioritising masculinity over the collective inability to initiate a break from consumer capitalism through violence.

By trying and failing to produce systemic transformation through violence, imagination underpin the novel's contradictory postmodern optimism. The issue central to Palahniuk's text is not so much the inability to construct a viable alternative, or, what Mark Bedford calls an 'alternative-that-is-no-alternative-at-all.'[266] Instead, the novel is an exemplar of a perpetual hope that shapes collective and constructive attempts to overcome advanced capitalism, even if this is defined by failure. Failure also prioritises imagination through collective violence, illustrating a shift from subjective to collective imagination that underpins part of postmodernism's continued cultural relevance. Andrew Hock Soon Ng claims, 'there is *nowhere in which* [the Narrator] *can escape*,' which is true physically but less so imaginatively.[267] Dreams obtain their power in the novel not specifically because they represent freedom from capitalism, but because the imagined purifying violence of the protagonist/s remains uncorrupted. Imagination extends Kevin Boon's description of the novel as being about 'self-discovery and self-empowerment' through an emphasis upon the collectively rather than subjectively imagined.[268] Transformation gains momentum as it shifts from individual enlightenment towards collective attempts to imagine and implement change systemically through violence, illustrating its significance in the novel. Ultimately, I claim failure makes a break from consumer capitalism an imaginative possibility rather than a realisable one, illustrating postmodernism's contemporary relevance through the novel.

The text reflects the dissatisfactions of late twentieth century anti-capitalist protest movements. Although occurring after *Fight Club*'s publication, the Battle for Seattle shares the novel's anti-capitalist sentiments and guerrilla tactics to counteract

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[265] Omar Lizardo, 'Fight Club, or the Cultural Contradiction of Late Capitalism', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 11 (3) (2017), 221-243 (p. 241).
[266] Mark Bedford, 'Smells like 1990s Spirit: The dazzling deception of *Fight Club*'s Grunge-aesthetic', *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, 9 (1) (2011), 49-63 (p. 54).
[267] Andrew Hock Soon Ng, 'Muscular Existentialism in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*', *Stirrings Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature*, 2 (2) (2005), 116-138 (p. 126).
[268] Kevin A. Boon, 'Men and Nostalgia for Violence: Culture and Culpability in Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club', *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 11 (3) (2003), 267-276 (p. 275).

capitalist supremacy. If, as Eric Krebbers and Merijn Schoenmaker note, 'The left has not been a very strong force since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and it hardly exists nowadays,' the Battle for Seattle and *Fight Club* are endemic of this ineffectuality.[269] Postmodernism's contemporary cultural currency derives from the continued difficulty to construct alternative grand narratives to advanced capitalism, represented by the Battle for Seattle, where collective anti-capitalist violence is driven by destruction rather than a constructive vision. John Dobson notably calls the Battle for Seattle America's first postmodern riot, since it had 'no ideological center.'[270] Here, as in the novels, collective rage struggles to assert itself affirmatively, reinforcing capitalism's ideological dominance by preventing the ability of counter-movements to think beyond it.

In *Fight Club*, the men's disenfranchisement radicalises them, positioning violence as a way of collectively challenging this framework. Their desire to experience something, even fear or pain, leads them to violence, underpinning its implied transformative qualities. Yet, the limited transformation is exemplified by their guerrilla tactics, where localised violence reflects an inability to systemically challenge advanced capitalism's post-Cold War dominance. Like Acker's novel, *Fight Club*'s violence reflects Jeffrey St. Clair's description of the Battle of Seattle: as having 'blackened the eyes of global capitalism and its shock troops, if only for a few raucous days and nights.'[271] A central distinguishing feature is that Acker's novel focuses upon the failed aftermath of revolution, while Palahniuk's text traces the failed build up to a systemically transformative event.

Arendt locates violence's transformative potential in its ability to strip away power for a subsequent creative act, claiming 'Violence can destroy power; [but] it is utterly incapable of creating it.'[272] Violence facilitates apparently constructive forms of power in the novel, specifically fight club's growth into Project Mayhem, but remains driven by

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[269] Eric Krebbers & Merijn Schoenmaker, 'Seattle '99: Wedding Party of the Left and the Right?', in *Confronting Capitalism: Dispatches from a Global Movement*, ed. by Eddie Yuen, Daniel Burton-Rose, and George Katsiaficas (Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2004), pp. 196-201, (p. 196).
[270] John Dobson, 'The Battle in Seattle: Reconciling Two World Views on Corporate Culture', *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 11 (3) (2001), 403-413 (p.403).
[271] Jeffrey St Clair, 'Seattle Diary', in *Confronting Capitalism: Dispatches from a Global Movement*, ed. by Eddie Yuen, Daniel Burton-Rose, and George Katsiaficas (Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2004), pp. 48-71, (p. 48).
[272] Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Orlando & London: Harvest, 1970), p. 56.

nihilistic destabilisation. The characters pursue a constructive potential that might follow, rather than revelling purely in the destructive acts of violence, shifting the tone of the textual violence away from Bateman's outbursts in *American Psycho*. Nevertheless, it represents a hope that destruction will produce a radical break through collective action, but repeats a cynicism produced by a failure to construct alternative frameworks to advanced capitalism. Violence repeats postmodern destabilisation in both Acker and Palahniuk's novels, driven by a failed hope of succeeding advanced capitalism through collective action.

The transformative potential of dreams in Acker's novel resonates with the ritualistic violence of *Fight Club*, providing a space to imagine alternatives that cannot be fully realised. Ruth Quiney likens the Narrator's imaginary alter-ego, Tyler Durden, to a 'postmodern Che Guevara,' which becomes more significant when considered alongside Acker's text.[273] Acker's dream-like Guevara is critiqued for not addressing material issues, which the terrorists attempt to realise through revolution. Durden, although a figment of the Narrator's imagination, similarly realises violence materially through fight club and Project Mayhem. Yet, in both instances, the groups' failure to implement transformation through collective violence emphasises their impotence, reinforcing the power of imagination. This contrast between imaginative and psychical construction is exemplified through the Narrator's anthropomorphisation of collective purifying violence in Durden.

Palahniuk's unnamed protagonist seeks out communities through an immediate relation to death. Initially, the Narrator fraudulently attends terminal illnesses support groups, giving his meaningless life purpose through 'a real experience of death.'[274] His superficial engagement is comparable to, Marla Singer, the love interest he calls a 'Faker' for also touring these groups.[275] Yet, his increasing connection to violence distinguishes him. This is exemplified by a linguistic shift comparable to Acker's move from terrorism to revolution: from the Narrator's relation to Marla, who he calls a 'big tourist' of support groups, towards his identification as one of 'the guerrilla terrorists of

[273] Ruth Quiney, '"Mr. Xerox," the Domestic Terrorist, and the Victim-Citizen', *Law & Literature*, 19 (2) (2007), 327-354 (p. 341).
[274] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 38.
[275] Ibid., p. 18.

the service industry' in Project Mayhem.[276] The Narrator's fringe group fail to successfully realise their radicalised violence, but collectively continue to hope for an opening towards the future possibility of social transformation they cannot fully realise.

Palahniuk's novel uses death and violence to formulate meaning in an otherwise transient and desensitised existence. On the opening page, Tyler suggests 'the first step to eternal life is you have to die,' emphasising the transformative qualities of violence.[277] If, as Marla claims, 'our culture has made death something wrong,' fight club makes violence a reaction to the sanitised capitalist culture they seek to escape.[278] Death frames the Narrator's quest for purpose, encapsulated by his claim that 'In death we become heroes.'[279] His indirect engagement with death in the support groups facilitates fight club's construction, where upscaled violence articulates a desire for an unrealised alternative to advanced capitalism collectively imagined through violence.

In a pre-digital age, bodily violence resists capitalism's immaterial economic value in the novel, grounding textual violence within twenty-first century theoretical discourse. Like Brian Massumi's description of the material affect of threat, the threat of individual and eventually systemic violence in *Fight Club* forges a connection between the immaterial and the immediately physical. For Massumi, threat is open ended because it is 'from the future,' giving it an immaterial form of existence: 'Threat is not real in spite of its nonexistence. It is superlatively real, because of it.'[280] This impact – or affect – of threat is physically experienced, despite not being a physical entity. In Palahniuk's novel, the threat of self-destruction gives fight club its allure, enabling the members to endure their otherwise meaningless existence. Yet, in fight club this threat quickly transforms into material violence, providing the momentary escape from capitalist society the men seek. The Narrator describes an experience where 'everything in the real world gets the volume turned down,' producing a residual calm where 'you're so relaxed, you just cannot care.'[281] Comparably, the fight clubs rely upon

[276] Ibid, pp. 24, 81.
[277] Ibid., p. 11.
[278] Ibid., p. 103.
[279] Ibid., p. 178.
[280] Brian Massumi, 'The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 52-70, (p. 53).
[281] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, pp. 49, 139.

immaterial threat, but to deaden the emotions of the members through implied and then experienced violence.

Violence replaces emotions for fight club's members, offering a physical rather than emotional form of quasi-therapy that gives their lives meaning. Emotional desensitisation occurs when violence is embraced rather than seen as a threat, embodying the group's rejection of effeminate consumerist society through hyper-masculinity: 'Most guys are at fight club because of something they're too scared to fight. After a few fights, you're afraid a lot less.'[282] Robert Paulson, a former bodybuilder the Narrator meets at a testicular cancer support group, exemplifies this violent rejection of emotions. Paulson's symbolic masculinity is undermined by his castration, leaving him with 'bitch tits,' and regularly crying in the support group.[283] Despite having a more authentic relation to death than the Narrator, fight club's temporary violent escapism, rather than the support group, fulfils him. Violence challenges the men's metaphorically castrated reality, reconnecting them to their masculinity by detaching death from emotions. Nevertheless, fight club's rules inhibit a more authentic experience of death, insisting a fight ends when someone goes limp or quits, contributing towards an escalation of violence that seeks systemic rather than personal transformation.

Fight club's shortcomings facilitate Project Mayhem's creation: an oppressive and contradictory ideology of violent destruction. Fight club's violent pseudo-therapy is replaced by an organisation that forces the men to look beyond 'their little tragedies,' investing in something bigger than themselves.[284] The transition to proper noun, from lower case fight club to capitalised Project Mayhem, reinforces the significance of the construction of a specific entity beyond a fragmented, amorphous collective. Fight club's appeal partly lies in its rejection of monetisation through the community's overt hyper-masculine violence. A mechanic's monologue, assumedly a verbatim replication of Tyler, exemplifies this: 'As long as you're at fight club, you're not how much money you've got in the bank. You're not your job. You're not your family, and you're not who you tell yourself.'[285] Yet, fight club's sanitised engagement with death pulls back from

[282] Ibid., p. 54.
[283] Ibid., p. 17.
[284] Ibid., p. 196.
[285] Ibid., p. 143.

annihilation at the point of real danger. The Narrator therefore cannot maintain the calming effects of fight club indefinitely:

> I felt like crap and not relaxed at all. I didn't get any kind of a buzz. Maybe I'd developed a jones. You can build up a tolerance to fighting, and maybe I needed to move on to something bigger.
> It was that morning, Tyler invented Project Mayhem.[286]

Project Mayhem aspires towards a more authentic experience of death through systemic destruction, outgrowing fight club like the support groups that preceded it. As Olivia Burgess states, 'Project Mayhem directs violence outwards to nonconsenting others and justifies its actions by the promise of liberation in the future,' distinguishing it from fight club's temporary personal liberation.[287] This shift from self-destruction to the collective desire for systemic destruction illustrates the evolution of purifying violence in the novel, where their recurring failure implies these violent movements are both imaginatively rather than practically liberating.

Project Mayhem positions destruction as a catalyst towards the construction of a post-capitalist society. This purifying violence echoes the creative destruction of Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilism – where the destruction of normalised values produces creative possibilities for strong individuals. The 'instinct of self-destruction, the will for nothingness' informing nihilism resonates with the self-destruction that replaces consumerist self-improvement in the text.[288] The Narrator suggests 'Maybe self-improvement isn't the answer,' wondering whether 'self-destruction is the answer,' making this connection to nihilistic violence explicit.[289] Self-destruction becomes a way of escaping the effeminising aesthetic beauty of the male body through brutality, comparable to 'The nihilist's eye,' which 'idealizes in the direction of ugliness.'[290] This force becomes creative when, for Nietzsche, 'It reaches its maximum of relative strength

[286] Ibid., p. 123.
[287] Olivia Burgess, 'Revolutionary Bodies in Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club', *Utopian Studies*, 23 (1) (2012), 263-280 (p.268).
[288] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 37.
[289] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 49.
[290] Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, p. 17.

as a violent force of destruction – as active nihilism.'[291] This active quality creates an opening that challenges the dominant status quo, where 'the old values born of declining' are replaced by 'the new ones of ascending life.'[292] Project Mayhem's shift from self-destruction to societal destruction extends the localised aims of fight club, where Tyler describes how 'Only after disaster can we be resurrected.'[293] Fight club's individualised acts of self-destruction through collective violence are refocused, becoming a collective attempt to overthrow advanced capitalism to then construct a new society. Even so, the textual failure to implement this destructive transformation makes it important not to overstate the constructive successes of nihilism in this context. When this disaster is seemingly unobtainable capitalism's dominance intensifies, making failed collectives focusing upon the flawed implementation of purifying violence the only viable form of construction.

Formal construction produces increasingly contradictory relations to consumer capitalism as their violence is formally organised. A member, assumedly paraphrasing Tyler, states that in fight club, 'We want you, not your money.'[294] Yet, this alone cannot support its expansion into Project Mayhem, which is paradoxically sustained by consumerism. By beating himself up in his boss' office to blackmail him, the Narrator is essentially payed *not* to work, detaching income from labour, so Tyler and the Narrator are 'free to start a fight club every night of the week.'[295] Self-destructive violence produces a creative act of philanthropy, subverting capitalism by adopting its parasitic nature, which is extended by Project Mayhem's commercial production of luxury soap. It symbolises the recycling of abject waste (liposuctioned human fat) combined with violence (extracting glycerine from boiling fat to produce explosives). Soap intertwines the group's attempt to undermine capitalism's wasteful production with its desire for destructive transformation, reinforced by Tyler's claim that 'With enough soap […] you could blow up the whole world.'[296] George Henderson notes the significance of waste in both the novel and capitalism's generation of consumer products, suggesting that

[291] Ibid., p. 18.
[292] Ibid., p. 39.
[293] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 70.
[294] Ibid., p. 143.
[295] Ibid., p. 117.
[296] Ibid., p. 73.

'before goods become trash, they are already trash.'[297] This cyclical process locates soap production within this exchange of destruction and construction – bodily pain to liposuctioned fat, fat to soap, glycerine to explosives, soap to waste and explosives to destruction. Although Henderson recognises the 'non-alternative' Project Mayhem's subversive complicity with capitalism offers, this complicity extends beyond the commodification of physical waste.[298]

The unpaid production of soap by the devoted Project Mayhem members intensifies the exploitation they seek to evade, reinforcing the hopelessness of escape that underpins the novel's oddly bleak optimism. Ever increasing soap sales accelerates their production of explosives, combined with the capital needed to implement the text's final destructive act, justifying their voluntary labour. Essentially, they invert fight club's funding method: while the Narrator was paid not to work, these men work without payment, making them, as Kyle Bishop suggests, 'cogs in a new machine.'[299] Yet, while Bishop locates this failure within authoritarian masculinity, it also arises from an inability to construct an alternative to capitalist consumption through violence. Despite leaving menial service jobs for a more fulfilling life, this process of escape perpetuates the systemic consumption and exploitation that disillusioned them. Therefore, when Marla calls the Narrator 'a monster two-faced capitalist suck-ass bastard' for stealing her mother's stored fats, she makes a combined reference to his split personality and political contradictions, exemplified by soap production.[300] Masculinity is secondary to the corruption of their collective dream which both facilitates the group's formulation and reinforces the distinction between the break from consumer capitalism they desire and reality.

The subtle rule change between fight club and Project Mayhem reinforces the group's connection to oppressive ideologies. If 'The first rule about fight club is you don't talk about fight club,' this silence solidifies the community's bond by reaffirming its

[297] George L Henderson, 'What Was Fight Club? Theses on the Value Words of Trash Capitalism', *Cultural Geographies*, 18 (2) (2011), 143-170 (p.149).
[298] Ibid., p. 152.
[299] Kyle Bishop, 'Artistic Schizophrenia: How "Fight Club"'s Message Is Subverted by Its Own Nature', *Studies in Popular Culture*, 29 (1) (2006), 41-56 (p.51).
[300] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 94.

marginality.[301] By contrast, 'You don't ask questions is the first rule in Project Mayhem,' seeking control of its members' actions *and* minds by preventing them questioning its authority.[302] The Narrator claims 'Nobody's the center of fight club except the two men fighting,' presenting an anarchic and decentralised power structure.[303] Yet, Tyler represents a masked centralised power, metaphorically and literally using this cover to walk 'slowly around the crowd, out in the darkness.'[304] When the Narrator asks the members questions – who made the rules, have they seen Tyler, etc. – they adhere to the first rule of fight club, and refuse to talk about it. It is unclear at this stage whether it is simply the reader who is unaware he and Tyler are the same person, or if the Narrator is also unaware, producing a notable ambiguity. If the Narrator is unaware, he unwittingly tests the men's ability to adhere to the first rule of fight club. Yet, if he is aware, his conscious and continual testing of his men intensifies the ideological control imposed upon the group. Irrespective, the democratic guise of fight club covertly facilitates the transition into Project Mayhem's totalitarian model through a discipline that escalates alongside the scope of the violence.

Project Mayhem's escalation of fight club's purifying violence connects it to the destructive creativity of religion. If, as Peter Mathews claims, fight club represents a 'new religion without religion,' the transition from fight club to Project Mayhem reflects a shift from enlightenment to radicalised fundamentalism.[305] However, here ideological devotion reaffirms the role of imagination through political failures, rather than focusing upon a critique of 'the totalitarian logic that underlies *both* sides of conventional politics.'[306] A religious form of destructive creation contrasts with Nietzsche's conception, but remains visible in Buddhism, the death of Christ, or fundamentalist terror attacks, albeit in altered forms. In each instance, destruction facilitates an epiphany through violence – whether the theoretical destruction of the self, the physical death that precedes resurrection, or the symbolic destabilisation of Western capitalism.

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[301] Ibid., p. 48.
[302] Ibid., p. 122.
[303] Ibid., p. 142.
[304] Ibid.
[305] Peter Mathews, 'Diagnosing Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club', *Stirrings Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature*, 2 (2) (2005), 81-104 (p.92).
[306] Ibid., p. 82.

Fight club offers its own pseudo-enlightenment – epitomised by the Narrator's claim, 'it's so cool to be ENLIGHTENED' – through the purifying violence Project Mayhem capitalises upon.[307] Tyler claims Project Mayhem, like fight club, aims to 'remind these guys what kind of power they still have.'[308] Yet, this distinguishes it from fight club's enlightenment. In fight club, personal enlightenment is produced by collective action. Project Mayhem's collective enlightenment is produced through dogmatic control of their thoughts and actions, rather than specifically by or for the individual. The men's power is only ever partially physical, and only partly theirs individually, since Project Mayhem's demands for anonymity and blind obedience consistently undermines the men's self-discovery.

The investment and expansion that replace fight club's enlightenment coincide with Tyler becoming a secular deity. This shift in ideology coincides with their increasing complicity with consumerism, making capitalism the spectre within his atheistic religion. Tyler's presentation of martyrdom as heroic, positioning death as a provider of meaning, aligns violent self-sacrifice with terrorism. This is exemplified when Tyler presents death as liberating and affirmative: 'Not like death as a sad, downer thing, this was going to be death as a cheery, empowering thing.'[309] Yet, when Project Mayhem fails to reset financial records, violence's transformative qualities are resigned to the group's collective imagination. By shooting himself in the head to prevent this systemically destructive act, the Narrator provides the text's most transformative violent act since beating himself up in front of his boss. Ironically, violent transformation returns to the personal through an act of self-sacrifice Tyler encourages Project Mayhem's members to undertake, echoing Acker's resignation of social transformation to imagination. Yet, this does not necessarily impact the group's collective identity, where failed violence reinforces rather than undermines their hope in its purifying potential, providing the only space consumer capitalism can seemingly be succeeded: imaginatively.

By making violence a future-imagined rather than physically present threat, it extends the escapism from consumerism that generated fight club's appeal. For

[307] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 64.
[308] Ibid., p. 120.
[309] Ibid., p. 203.

Massumi, this future threat remains connected to reality because it continues to be felt personally, even if it cannot be collectively experienced as a physical actuality. He states 'Self-renewing menace potential is the future reality of threat.'[310] The novel's inability to translate imagined violence into a successfully constructed programme that succeeds consumer capitalism draws upon this possibility. In the closing lines of the novel, while the Narrator recovers in hospital, a Project Mayhem staff-member informs the Narrator 'Everything's going according to the plan,' suggesting the organisation lives on.[311] It is unclear if this is a direct extension of his delusions – whether drug-induced or the result of a psychological breakdown – or the result of an existing group produced by his imagined alter-ego, Tyler. Irrespective, imagination is central to the possibility of a violent break from consumer capitalism.

As Krister Friday suggests, the novel's ending prioritises 'the choice of *deferral* over the engagement of the movement itself.'[312] This makes the perpetual yet distant hope of such a radical break an unattainable dream, rather than an actual possibility. Yet, Friday assumes Durden rather than the Narrator speaks in these closing lines, inferring he has defeated the Narrator, making this extended deferral less likely in the long-term. If the Narrator recounts this final scene, Durden, like the revolutionary potential of Project Mayhem, becomes a purely imagined image of purifying violence. By reinforcing failure through Tyler's absence, violent social transformation is resigned to a distant imagined possibility in a way that more explicitly extends the text's failures.

Despite the imagined possibility of change, neither fight club nor Project Mayhem offer viable alternatives to advanced capitalism. The novel privileges imagination in lieu of this break from consumer capitalism, reinforcing a postmodern cynicism through its representations of violence. The escalation of physical violence reinforces an inability to realise this break from consumer capitalism, entangling the groups in a series of contradictions that corrupt the purity of their imagined violence. Fundamentally, purifying destruction replaces actual transformation, setting up hope in collective action, even if

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[310] Massumi, 'The Future Birth of the Affective Fact', p. 53.
[311] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 208.
[312] Krister Friday, '"A Generation of Men Without History": *Fight Club*, Masculinity, and the Historical Symptom', *Postmodern Culture*, 13 (3) (2003) <http://www.shirleymohr.com/JHU/Sample_Articles_JHUP/PMC_2003_13_3.pdf> [accessed 28th August 2020].

this perpetually fails. Therefore, the novel provides an optimistic twist on postmodern cynicism by depicting a collective space where alternatives can be constructed, even of only theoretically.

Conclusion

These novels are significant because this question of how to succeed advanced capitalism's dominant framework is repeated without resolution today. The desire to break away from advanced capitalism through collective action continues to be considered but is yet to be realised. This inability to supplant advanced capitalism produces a continuum of failed transformation, stretching from Soviet communism to the September 11th attacks, via the Battle for Seattle. It is precisely this feature that means Acker and Palahniuk's novels retain their relevance today – not despite, but because of their connection to postmodernism. This disenfranchisement with global capitalism's cultural sanitisation extends from the death throes of the Cold War to the present, presenting a period of postmodernism defined by an intensification of the lack of alternatives this produces.

Violence fails to break away from advanced capitalism in these novels, relocating postmodern cynicism within an external and collective hope. Instead of the hallucinatory nihilism of Bateman, these novels depict a collective imagination that desires constructive possibilities that follow destruction. Where Bateman's imagined violence provides a failed subjective escape, Acker and Palahniuk's protagonists pursue social transformation through a collective imagination. Although to different extents Acker and Palahniuk's protagonists revert back to their individualism, these novels trace a shift within American postmodernism from subjective experience to collective action. Their failure to achieve more than superficial change through violence extends the protagonists' search for meaning, contrasting Bateman's fatalism. Failure reinforces a distinction between imagination and reality that prioritises the immaterial as a space in which alternatives can be constructed, but does not provide concrete models in the texts, only the hope of something better. By relocating this radical break within the characters' immaterial dreamworld, reality is replaced with imagination, making it comparable to Bateman's hallucinatory violence.

The hopes of Acker and Palahniuk's protagonists distinguish them from the fatalism of Bateman, but offer no more significant challenge to advanced capitalism through collective action. Violence's abstract transformative possibilities are presented as an interim replacement for these alternatives in both texts, exemplified by their self-identification with terrorism. They remain unable to conceive grand narratives that could replace advanced capitalism, focusing on collective violence as a destructive catalyst that would clear the way for their creation. The texts' failure to radically break from advanced capitalism is repeated in twenty-first century postmodern novels, as is the shift in focus from subjectivity to exteriority. In the following chapters, this is connected to collective expressions of desire, ecological concerns and digital culture, illustrating how these concerns are repeated and extending in contemporary writing. These twenty-first century works similarly struggle to comprehend either an end to advanced capitalism or postmodernism, reinforcing the limits that both models present, but express this connection between limit and repetition in distinct yet related ways. The novels' extension of postmodern cynicism towards radical transformation is repeated in twenty-first century culture through the continued inability to produce alternatives to advanced capitalism. Although textual depictions of violence have shifted towards terrorism post-9/11, the focus remains upon destabilisations of this totalising framework through localised acts of violence by marginal collectives.

3. Revitalising Postmodern Desire: Waste & Subversion in *Love Creeps* and *Sadie: The Sadist*

Repetition provides a way of revitalising postmodern representations of extreme sexual desire in Amanda Filipacchi's *Love Creeps* (2005) and Zané Sachs' *Sadie: The Sadist* (2014). The novels build upon both the excessive desire and disillusionment of Patrick Bateman, illustrating the shortcomings of attempting to destabilise advanced capitalism through subjective replications of its systemic excess. Where Bateman's excessive desire sought out the apparently unreachable limits of an ever expanding system in *American Psycho*, Filipacchi and Sachs' texts produce an excess of desire through the imposition of limits. In this context, an excess of desire is an expression of sexuality that is fundamentally unproductive, resisting economic rationalisation and therefore commodification on some level. Rather than representing the logical conclusion of advanced capitalism's systemic excesses, *Love Creeps* and *Sadie*'s depiction of sexual desire is connected to limitations, positioning this desire against a deregulated capitalist excess. This makes the excess of desire found in Filipacchi and Sachs' novels a form of waste distinct from capitalist excess, which remains systemically productive, differentiating it from the reincorporation of Bateman's excessive desire that marks its failure. Waste is neither divine nor abject here, nor is it consistently ecologically focused. Instead, waste represents an entanglement of systemic and subjective excess, providing a shifting conceptualisation of subversion that draws upon ecological concerns in some contexts, and the surreal in others. The notable shift from subjective to collective is continued here, expanding from the collective desire in *Love Creeps* to focus upon depersonalised factors – economic and ecological instability – that might facilitate radical transformation in *Sadie*. The recurring failures to achieve radical transformation remains central to these novels, informing their prioritisation of more modest acts of subversion. Most significantly, Filipacchi and Sachs repeat postmodern conventions within a twenty-first century context, attempting to revitalise them by appropriating them to express a discrete set of cultural concerns. Nineties American transgressive fiction represents a postmodern sub-genre that appropriated a French

literary tradition towards its own ends – a process that is repeated by Filipacchi and Sachs. In doing so, they not only repeat literary tropes connected to postmodernism, combined with its cynicism towards radical transformation, but also draw upon its process of appropriation.

Love Creeps and *Sadie* foreground distinct features of twenty-first century literary postmodernism, extending a number of postmodernism's concerns through a revitalising form of repetition. As such, they are exemplary of the broader argument made in this thesis. The textual depictions of sexual desire combine American and French literary and theoretical contexts connected to postmodernism, reinvigorated by the connections they draw between waste, limitation and subversion. These features are appropriated and reworked, responding to a distinct cultural moment that continues to challenge a seemingly unsurpassable advanced capitalist framework. Filipacchi's novel depicts an excess of desire produced through a connection to absence. It responds to critiques of transgressive desire's complicity with advanced capitalism's systemic excess, partly extending from its popularisation in nineties American culture. Sachs' novel similarly produces an excess of desire through constriction, which again is positioned against advanced capitalism's systemic excess. However, it is informed by the 2008 financial crash and ecological concerns, which complicate its depiction of waste in a way that attempts to account for these cultural shifts. Fundamentally, both novels position the excess of desire they depict against the capitalist excesses their novels seek to restrict. These texts stage reflections upon the connection between sexual desire and capitalist excess that evidences postmodernism's continued cultural currency within twenty-first century culture.

A significant change in the relation between textual representations of an excess of desire and the features of advanced capitalism is depicted in the novels' critique. The texts' disturbing and extreme scenes offer a shifting set of priorities in their critiques of advanced capitalism, where desire's subversive potential is reconsidered through absence and ecology as contemporarily relevant forms of limitation. This shapes textual representations of an excess of desire and its connection to waste as a means of subverting the totalising socio-political system. Initially, *Love Creeps* is presented as an attempt to update the apparently exhausted vitality of nineties American transgressive

fiction. In Filipacchi's novel, desire is continually undermined by absence, making it a form of waste that distinguishes it from advanced capitalism's systemic excess, while also intensifying the novel's most unsettling scenes. Next, I consider how *Sadie* recalibrates the connection between the systemic excesses of advanced capitalism and waste, prioritising external limits that constrain depictions of an excess of desire. In Sachs' novel, value is produced through forms of reuse connected to sexual desire, subverting systemic waste while simultaneously remaining economically unproductive. Where *Love Creeps* critically extends the legacy of nineties American transgressive fiction connected to postmodernism, *Sadie* appropriates the template of one of the sub-genre's most infamous novels, *American Psycho*. Yet, despite this distinction, both texts consider methods of limiting rather than succeeding advanced capitalism's dominance, internalising the logic of postmodernism framed by the limits of radical transformation. Essentially, I argue the imposition of limits upon representations of an excess of desire gives it a critical vitality that is mobilised within twenty-first century American postmodern fiction. Overall, I demonstrate how waste offers a means of representing a complex entwinement of advanced capitalist excess and attempts to subvert it, which have been mobilised to reflect upon a distinct set of concerns in contemporary writing.

Absence & Desire: Subversion in the Wake of Transgression

Love Creeps considers an excess of desire in light of the critical limitations of transgression, particularly its collusion with advanced capitalist excess. Peter Stallybrass and Allison White define transgression's carnivalesque nature as historico-social expressions of 'transgressive desire and economic and political contradictions in the social form.'[313] Despite its challenges to socio-political structures, they argue transgression 'serves the interests of that very official culture which it apparently opposes.'[314] This complicity suspends rather than transforms existing power structures, locating both postmodern critiques of radical transformation and this reading of Filipacchi's novel within a history of transgression's contradictions. Like

[313] Peter Stallybrass & Allison White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 26.
[314] Ibid., p. 13.

postmodernism's cynicism towards radical transformation, transgression provides a critical destabilisation of existing structures through subversion that offers no alternative model. This informs Lynn's initial absence of desire that rejects consumer culture without posing an alternative, alongside the excess of desire that follows, where an uncommodifiable waste similarly subverts rather than transforms systemic capitalism. *Love Creeps* draws upon the subversive features of transgression, appropriating its absence of alternatives as an integral means of expressing advanced capitalism's perpetual dominance through representations connected to absence.

The novel's implied reflexive commentary on the complicity of transgression, and how this problematises desire as a critical tool, extends postmodern concerns into twenty-first century American fiction. *American Psycho*'s depiction of desire's limited transformative potential alters the ways in which we might view Filipacchi's textual representations of sexual desire, illustrating an excess of desire's entwinement with capitalism's systemic excesses. Yet, this does not make critiques of advanced capitalist society staged through an excess of desire redundant. Instead, the novel's incorporation of sexual desire stages a critical reflection upon transgression's subversive potential through limitation. Absence in some ways limits sexual desire to undermine capitalist excess, while simultaneously intensifying the characters' actions. In its attempts to revitalise transgressive desire's critical potential, Filipacchi's novel produces an excess of desire that represents a wasteful expenditure that is otherwise unproductive within a capitalist framework.

In her essay 'The Pornographic Imagination,' Susan Sontag distinguishes the social history of pornography from the psychology and artistic depictions of sexual extremity to present transgressive fiction's critical potential. This informs her suggestion that visceral literary representations of sexual desire can become 'something else' than the material pornographic actions they depict, making them intellectual rather than sensual projects.[315] Transgressive tropes are therefore not included for their own sake, nor to arouse, but become a mediator for representing linguistic, ideological and theoretical extremity. By foregrounding the distinction between real life and artistic

[315] Susan Sontag, 'The Pornographic Imagination', in Georges Bataille *The Story of the Eye* (London & New York: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 83-118, (p. 84).

depravity, Sontag stresses a value of a socio-philosophical commentary that seeks to redeem – or at least reframe – their otherwise incomprehensible narrative scenes. In doing so, she foregrounds the significance of American postmodernism's appropriation of this French literary and philosophical history. *Love Creeps* continues this legacy, figuratively dramatising extremity through representations of sexual desire to symbolically stage critical reflections upon the limits of society and liberation through their uncompromising brutality.

In *Love Creeps*, sexual desire is positioned against capitalist excess through an absence that rejects a perpetual cycle of consumption. The success and relative comfort of the novel's protagonist, Lynn, means she has no obvious needs, but also no immediate wants. In Lynn's words: 'It's not lucky, especially for someone like me, who thrives on resistance. I've succeeded, perhaps too consistently, too well, at everything I've set out to do. I've gotten everything I wanted.'[316] Although Lynn is specifically talking about her absence of romantic desire, art, sexuality and her career are connected through a disillusionment that manifests as an absence of desire. Her success as an art curator has enabled her to make a career out of resisting social norms through thought provoking art. Yet, this success has seemingly removed the barriers she previously resisted, impacting upon the pleasure she gains. Lynn even states, the 'Art that used to stimulate me no longer does,' connecting her absent sexual desire to a broader experience of passion, including the politics of an artistic resistance mediated by capitalism.[317] She is not described as unsuccessful romantically – demonstrated by her stalker, Alan, that she mentions in the opening pages of the novel. Nevertheless, the absence of resistance in both contexts has meant 'she had suddenly found herself wanting nothing.'[318] Instead of this being a celebratory realising of her desires, continually attaining them has left her unfulfilled, drawing comparisons to Bateman's disillusionment. In Filipacchi's text, waste responds to a comparable emptiness of consumerist aspirations, attempting to realign an excess of desire with its

[316] Amanda Filipacchi, *Love Creeps* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2005), pp. 80-81.
[317] Ibid., p. 4.
[318] Ibid., p. 1.

subversive potential, rather than being reduced to simply another quantifiable commodity.

Lynn's dismay resonates with the problematic of revitalising desire as a subversive tool within contemporary society. Steven Shaviro suggests 'Transgression is now fully incorporated into the logic of political economy,' robbing it of its previous vibrant subversive potential in a way that echoes Lynn's disillusionment.[319] In a system where 'nothing is more prized than excess,' desire's subversive potential is no longer guaranteed, undermining its ability to resist the advanced capitalist status quo.[320] Lynn seeks to expand her ability to desire, like Bateman, but from a distinctly different starting point. She is unable to feel anything and therefore also unable to desire anything, emphasising an absence that stands counter to the expected abundance of desire expressed within consumer culture. This produces a paradoxical relation to desire, which she calls a 'desire to desire,' connecting desire to an absence that initially restricts depictions of sexual excess.[321] Subsequently, she decides to begin stalking someone she feels no attraction towards because 'She became envious of everyone who wanted,' including her stalker.[322] Lynn's hope that Roland, the man she chooses to stalk, will reject her informs attempts to reawaken her sexual desire through resistance that, in Lynn's words, aims 'To make sure I'm rejected on a regular basis.'[323] Therefore, Lynn presents rejection as a means of transforming her relation to both desire and absence. Rejection not only provides a point of resistance, but also makes her actions a form of waste through their apparent uselessness and the inability to commodify her deliberately unrequited desire.

By seeking ways to revitalise her sexual desire through perverse predatory actions connected to waste, Lynn complicates the text's depiction of desire and implicitly its politicised subversive role. Her desensitisation that requires rejection or resistance to be reignited presents an attempt to critique the shortcomings of capitalist excess through a critically aware deployment of transgressive tropes. Lynn's ability to

[319] Shaviro, *No Speed Limit*, p. 33.
[320] Ibid., p. 32.
[321] Filipacchi, *Love Creeps*, p. 7.
[322] Ibid., p. 1.
[323] Ibid., p. 81.

resist in a traditional sense is problematised by her ability to get what she wants, which she describes as unsatisfying. Her dissatisfaction with the absence of limits reflects a need to critically reposition an excess of desire that responds to deregulated forms of consumption and attainment that produces her apathy. Although absence is integral to the limits placed on sexual desire in the novel, sexual extremity is continually present. This explains why the comment made by Roland's doorman is not fully representative of the novel's depiction of sexual desire: 'Desire is a curse. You're lucky to be free of yours.'[324] Although a commodified capitalist desire embodied by consumer culture is presented as a curse, the novel positions a relation to desire via absence rather than desire being completely absent. A complete absence produces no more opportunities for resistance than continually having her desires met, making a recalibration of subjective expressions of desire central to the novel's attempts to reignite transgression's critical vitality. The text's critique of capitalism's systemic excesses is produced through subjective expressions of desire connected to absence. Here, absence produce an excess of desire that remains a form of waste that cannot be fully incorporated into consumer culture.

Georges Bataille presents the connection between sexual desire, destruction and excess as an unproductivity that resists capitalist rationalisation, becoming a subversive form of waste. In 'The Notions of Expenditure,' 'perverse sexual activity' is valorised for having no intrinsic economic value, representing one of a number of activities that 'have no end beyond themselves.'[325] Perversity becomes a '*nonproductive expenditure*,' or wasteful excess, since it has no coherent use within capitalism's economic framework.[326] This is reinforced in *The Accursed Share* through an excess that cannot be completely absorbed by the growth of a system – like capitalist economics – because it is expressed destructively, 'gloriously or catastrophically,' rather than productively.[327] Glorious waste represents a surplus that is not absorbed, indicating the

[324] Ibid, p. 11.
[325] Georges Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure', in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. by Allan Stoekl, trans. by Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2008), pp. 116-129, (p. 118).
[326] Ibid., 117.
[327] Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share Volume 1*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 21.

limit of a systemic ability to productively utilise and rationalise the energy Bataille describes.

Love Creeps connects sexual desire to waste in a comparable yet distinct way. The novel engages with transgressive fiction's depiction of sexual desire, but cannot consider extremity as a limit that necessarily produces this unproductive or glorious waste. This is because, like capitalist excess, transgression pursues an exterior limit that replicates the expansion of markets, and therefore the quantification of desire that is made productive. In partial contrast, the text repositions the location of this limit to produce an excess of desire through a relation to absence. Instead of singularly exceeding advanced capitalism's framework of excess – something Bateman fails to do – Filipacchi's novel subverts capitalist expansion by placing restrictions upon desire. These restrictions, created by connecting sexual desire to absence, produce forms of resistance that counter-intuitively increase their intensity, producing a wasteful excess of desire that also accounts for a postmodern absence of an outside advanced capitalism.

The disconcerting scenes of extremity in *Love Creeps* stage critical reflections upon socio-political power dynamics through representations of desire and its twenty-first century reworking of Bataillean waste. This is exemplified by the sexual advance Lynn makes upon Alan, shortly after he decides to stop stalking her:

> Lynn had sneaked past the doorman and been hiding in the stairwell, waiting for Alan to come home. This was too much. He felt beaten down. He flung her into his apartment. She stumbled but was not deterred. She came back at him like a magnet, arms outstretched, to hug him. And she did. She tried to kiss him. She put her hand on his crotch.
>
> Alan could feel his erection. He knew he didn't have to take it anymore, and he knew how he could fight back. He would rape her. It would be difficult, but he would try. It's hard to rape someone who wants you desperately.
>
> As he ripped off her clothes, she clearly misinterpreted his actions. She thought he was being passionate. He'd show her it was not passion. It was violence, it was rape.[328]

[328] Filipacchi, *Love Creeps*, p. 201.

While the scene is undoubtedly disturbing, as Tanya Horeck claims, 'the idea of rape' provides a way of thinking through cultural and political issues, since it 'troubles the boundaries between literature, politics, law, popular culture, film studies and feminism.'[329] The destabilisation of boundaries reinforces the novel's connection to postmodernism as much as Sontag, subverting rather than validating regressive cultural stereotypes through extremity. This is exemplified by the scene's reliance upon miscommunication, where an excess of desire underpins Lynn and Alan's redefined relationship. Lynn's misunderstanding of Alan's intentions problematises the perpetrator and victim roles, staging a feminist critique of this gendered power imbalance. Sarah Projansky describes feminist redefinitions of rape in texts 'as a social narrative through which to articulate anxieties, to debate, and to negotiate various other social issues.'[330] Similarly, Filipacchi emphasises an ability to appropriate and critically subvert the power imbalance associated with rape. The scene dramatises negative stereotypes connected to the issue of consent in its apparent trivialisation of sexual assault. Alan justifies and seeks to minimise his aggression towards Lynn through her apparent desire for him, troubling the expected dynamic of rape by replacing it with the way it is frequently downplayed. Both characters fulfil an unexpected role that, when acted out, is troubling in a parallel way to more conventional rape scene. Its unbelievable nature provides a dissonance between expectations and the scene, escalating its horror through a connection to the surreal. While this seems to trivialise the severity of rape, its dramatisation of the cultural logic used to tacitly accept this form of patriarchal violence is precisely what makes it so troubling.

This scene is made more disturbing when read alongside an absence that recalibrates representations of extreme sexual desire through its entwinement with capitalist excess. Alan's absent desire intensifies the scene's brutality, making it integral to its representation of sexual violence. He receives the attention he always wanted from Lynn, but not on the terms he wanted it – coming too late, it angers rather than elates him. By contrast, Lynn's newfound desire is provoked by Alan's rejection,

[329] Tanya Horeck, *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), p. vii.
[330] Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York & London: New York University Press, 2001), p. 11.

affirming her self-confessed need for resistance to feel passion again. Together, they personify systemic and subversive desire. Alan's expectation that his wants will be met on his own terms is comparable to an advanced capitalist framework that requires desire to correspond with its structural ability to define it as useful. This makes it difficult to read him as a subversive or positive figure through his predatory, and in this case violent, actions. Lynn's relation to desire is more subversive and complex, since it is produced by absence. Alan's disinterest in her produces a point of resistance that ignites her sexual desire, which becomes the only thing protecting her from the fully horrifying implications of his actions, inferring she is enjoying what she does not recognise as an attempted rape. Lynn's desire is constructed from an absence that is useless to Alan, even undermining his violent intentions towards her. Her actions and response cannot be fully rationalised or explained, producing a desire that is unproductive in its refusal of both male desire and troubling refusal to explicitly reject sexual assault. It represents a waste within the advanced capitalist system of excess it critiques, reinforcing the taboo status of rape by destabilising the conventional roles of perpetrator and victim. Lynn's excess of desire therefore represents a form of waste that is unquantifiable for both Alan and socio-political rationalisations of sexual desire through capitalist excess.

In this scene, the otherwise surreal inversion of the stalking sequence – Lynn eventually stalks Alan and Roland stalks her – becomes intensely jarring through this connection to absence as waste. Its depiction of sexual violence juxtaposes the conventions of extremity, amplifying the reader's discomfort through an inability to disentangle the scene's visceral nature from its surreal, verging on comedic, aesthetic. Waste is therefore produced in an unlikely way: by Filipacchi refusing to pursue more conventional transgressive tropes, where brutality is derived exclusively from a serious and excessively explicit aesthetic. Instead, its visceral nature is derived from a blurring of distinctions between the almost comedic and the ethically reprehensible, replicating the blurred boundary between transgressive and capitalist excesses that problematises its critical vitality. Jean-François Lyotard claims there is 'no external reference' to late capitalism, resulting in a desire to 'eliminate the idea of revolution,' since it is impossible

to create a clean break from capitalist excess when critiquing it.[331] This entwinement amplifies the scene's troubling nature, combining a postmodern blurring of boundaries with its critique of radical transformation to produce an excess of desire. In doing so, the scene refuses productivity within a logic of excess that relies purely on a linear extremity that replicates the mechanisms of capitalist excess. Filipacchi complicates clear-cut distinctions between system and subversion, victim and perpetrator, and an excess of desire and the aesthetic conventions of transgressive extremity. The novel integrates absence as a form of limitation that recalibrates extremity to produce a distinctly different excess of desire.

The text's troubling of both clear-cut boundaries and an excess of desire focused upon absolute limits of extremity partly distinguishes it from a French history of literary transgression. Michel Foucault defines transgression through an analysis of French literature, where he argues depravity provides a way of representing extremity:

> The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows.[332]

The Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille's fiction are drawn upon to illustrate this point, exemplifying this uncrossable limit through their representations of debauchery. Their depiction of a series of sexually violent acts that emphasise an unrealisable extremity reinforces a physical limit that is only crossable imaginatively. Foucault therefore privileges literary transgression for its ability to construct the most unrealisable and disturbing acts, reinforcing physical and ethical social norms by exceeding them. *Love Creeps* integrates comparably disturbing scenes of sexual depravity, reinforcing its connection to transgressive literary tropes. Yet, advanced capitalism's systemically integrated excesses complicate its contemporary subversive potential. This is depicted in the novel by a blurring of clear-cut boundaries that connects it to postmodernism's

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[331] Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 107, 116.
[332] Michel Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. by Donald F. Bouchard, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 29-52, (p. 34).

displacement of binary logic. The novel's combination of absence and sexual desire partly replicates the blurred boundary between systemic and subversive excess. However, by limiting depictions of desire, it distinguishes them from the mechanisms of a capitalist excess constantly pursuing a more extreme external limit. By differentiating sexual desire from this process, *Love Creeps* produces an excess of desire through absence that resists economic explanation and productivity, making it a twenty-first century form of Bataillean waste. When depictions of sexual desire are no longer equated with absolute freedom, their potential for liberation transforms into methods of subversion that depict an inability to radically transform advanced capitalism.

American Psycho provides a watershed moment in American postmodern fiction, adding a further context to which Filipacchi's novel responds. Bateman's extremity stages the novel's critique of capitalist excess, reflecting upon the limits of an affirmative desire commodified by advanced capitalism. The text's reservations with the pursuit of extremity as a subversive tool when it replicates the logic of advanced capitalism is extended in *Love Creep*'s production of an excess of desire through absence. Both novels draw upon tropes of transgressive fiction but complicate a binary logic through the collapsed distinction between systemic and subversive excess, reinforcing their connection to postmodernism. As Michael Silverblatt states, nineties American transgressive fiction can be viewed as 'the *new* new thing,' but only if its depictions of violent, sexual and hedonistic desire are read as representative of their particular cultural moment.[333] The cultural phenomenon of *American Psycho* is comparable to the post-obscenity trial publication of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* in the early sixties.[334] Collectively they represent an artistic merit that intellectualised a countercultural expression of liberation through sexual extremity, reinforced by the English translations of French transgressive fiction that followed this overturned ban. Both periods provide landmark turning points in cultural responses to sexually explicit novels connected to postmodernism. Yet, while Miller

[333] Michael Silverblatt, 'SHOCK APPEAL: Who Are These Writers, and Why Do They Want To Hurt Us?: The New Fiction of Transgression', *Los Angeles Times*, 1st August 1993 <http://articles.latimes.com/1993-08-01/books/bk-21466_1_young-writers> [accessed 4th August 2020].
[334] Frederick Whiting, 'Monstrosity on Trial: The Case of "Naked Lunch"', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 52 (2) (2006), 145-174 (p. 145).

describes the *Tropic of Cancer* as being about 'the problem of self-liberation' rather than sex, *American Psycho* and then *Love Creeps* extend this approach, but view the possibility of liberation more cynically.[335] Where Miller and Burroughs signify the beginning of an American literary postmodernism, Ellis and Filipacchi symbolise an increasing cynicism towards the liberating potential of desire that recalibrates its textual deployment.

Definitions of postmodern transgressive fiction responded to the cultural surge produced by Ellis' novel, but failed to capture its complex hypocrisy in the ways both *Love Creeps* and *American Psycho* demonstrate. For James Gardner, American transgressive fiction upheld 'the error of supposing that, because everything indeed is not right with the world, everything must accordingly be wrong with the world.'[336] Similarly, for Jonathan Dee, its shocking opposition to an overly simplified moral code meant it was 'working in conditions of profound safety disguised as risk.[337] They connect hypocrisy to this nineties sub-genre, but locate this contradiction within critiques of the novels rather than as integral to the texts' critiques of advanced capitalism. While numerous examples can be found that support these definitions, Ellis and Filipacchi's novels in particular refuse the binary logic that assumes explicit representations of sexual desire are perpetually liberating.

Their critiques of capitalist excess through transgressive tropes evidences the novels' nuanced reflection upon the apparent inability to achieve radical transformation. Yet, where Bateman's attainment of his most extreme desires leaves him disillusioned at the end of *American Psycho*, Lynn begins from a comparable – albeit significantly less extreme – disillusionment at the beginning of *Love Creeps*. The liberating potential of desire is challenged through contradiction in both novels, but where Ellis' novel remains dismayed with extremity, Filipacchi's introduces a limit through absence that facilitates the production of a waste that is not fully commodified by advanced capitalism.

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[335] Henry Miller, *The World of Sex* (London: Wyndham Publications, 1977), p. 60.
[336] James Gardner, 'Transgressive Fiction' *National Review*, 17th June 1996, pp. 54-56, 56.
[337] Jonathan Dee, 'Ready-Made Rebellion: The Empty Tropes of Transgressive Fiction' *Harper Magazine*, April 2005, pp. 87-91, 90.

Lynn and Roland's weekend away together provides a further instance where sexual desire is connected to absence to produce an excess of desire that resist binary logic and capitalist excess. Their interactions with the hotel owner, Max, present sexual gratuity through an absence and constriction of desire. Max 'turned red quickly' and 'gushed with apologies' when they walk in on his sexual encounter.[338] Yet, as Charles the hotel's assistant manager explains, Max 'absolutely relishes feeling embarrassed,' which is 'part of his pleasure.'[339] Max relocates desire in his humiliation rather than physical sex, foregrounding the scene's reliance upon absence: of the unwilling guests' consent and their naivety towards Max's hidden intentions. Max's voyeuristic and masochistic desire relies upon rejection, making it comparable to the resistance Lynn seeks to reignite her desire through stalking. Nevertheless, Max's desire is also distinct from stalking (there is no implied desire for reciprocation) and from the disconcerting rape scene between Lynn and Alan (there is no physical contact between Max and his victims). This scene relies upon Lynn and Roland's absent desire to both generate Max's and to produce the sinister undertones that make it troubling.

Max's manipulation of his guests intensifies the scene's discomfort through a disorder that emphasises a postmodern critique of progress, combined with their unwilling participation. In Filipacchi's novel, disorder generates opportunities for Max to expose himself via the deliberately muddled sequencing of room numbers, incorporating fragmentation thematically rather than methodologically. By making numerical progression redundant, disorientated, they enter the wrong room and encounter Max – 'Room *eight*? But it's between five and seven!'[340] Waste is not simply produced through an extremity that resists logical progression in *Love Creeps*, but via a connection to limitation and absence, where the novel's depiction of desire resists absorption into systems of knowledge and understanding. Filipacchi encounters the normalisation of the systemic excess of capitalism, making absence a way of reproducing subversive, unproductive waste through an excess of desire.

[338] Filipacchi, *Love Creeps*, p. 56.
[339] Ibid., p. 58.
[340] Ibid., p. 57.

Max's attempt to run a successful business limits his desire, generating a complex relation to advanced capitalism through constriction rather than unbridled excess. Charles neatly summarises this in his description of Max: 'He doesn't allow himself to indulge in this favourite pleasure of his very often. It could be bad for business.'[341] Here, the connection between transgressive desire and capitalist excess resonates with Shaviro's assertion that transgression has been fully incorporated into the political logic of capitalism. By limiting his ability to act out his sexual proclivities in order to generate an income, Max situates his sexual desire within a capitalist framework that limits it. This should be contrasted with absence as an alternative form of limit that generates resistance and therefore an excess of desire. Instead, this is closer to the Burroughs' description of resistance and systemic dominance in his paper 'The Limits of Social Control': 'When there is no more opposition, control becomes a meaningless proposition.'[342] Although Max's sexual desire theoretically resists the logic of advanced capitalism, undermining his generation of wealth, it is limited to the point that it minimises any oppositional force this poses. In this respect, it does not need to be controlled because the market implicitly already controls it, making the need to impose any kind of sanctions or punishment completely meaningless. The only time an excess of desire is produced is within the act itself, through the absence of desire of the unwilling participants. However, his continual awareness of the repercussions restrict his expressions of desire, making them a momentary release that echoes Stallybrass and White's sociological definition of transgression, preventing his actions from being truly liberating. His occasional carnivalesque outbursts of perversity reinforce the need to locate his un-productive desire within an inescapable advanced capitalist framework of commerce, undermining their connection to absence as anything more than a passing subversion. Max's desire therefore reinforces a postmodern cynicism towards the inability to achieve radical social transformation. The unproductive nature of Max's perverse desire is unable to successfully evade the totalising force of advanced capitalism that ultimately restricts it.

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[341] Ibid., p. 58.
[342] William Burroughs, 'The Limits of Control', in *Schizo-Culture: The Book*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer and David Morris (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013), pp. 38-42, (p. 38).

Significantly, and in partial contrast to Sontag's description of pornographic fiction, the novel generates an excess of desire through depravity constructed from absence. Where Sontag presented representations of extreme sexual desire as figurative rather than literal, Filipacchi's text stages a scene that produces the opposite effect: reading sexual depravity into innocence, rather than coherence into perversity. On a couple of occasions, the novel draws upon implied connections to extreme debauchery, but to subvert the organising logic Sontag uses to connect transgressive tropes to philosophical introspection. The text's singular reference to Sontag exemplifies this, encouraging the reader to connect sexual extremity with an otherwise superfluous scene, producing meaning from an otherwise inconsequential detail where sexual desire remains absent. Roland is addressed by a woman aesthetically compared to Sontag, described as: 'A magnificent woman with black hair topped by a lock of white hair, somewhat resembling a skunk or Susan Sontag, stood there.'[343] The reference invites a connection to Sontag's work on pornographic fiction in a scene where representations of sexual desire are absent, connecting it to the text's recurring depictions of sexual perversity and extremity. Absence represents a form of waste, producing an overreading of sexual desire that is unproductive through its inversion of the conventions of transgressive fiction described by Sontag.

The novel's more explicit example of this overreading of sexual desire is produced by Roland, extending this expansion of the ways an excess of desire can function through absence. Roland's sinister analysis of Alan's seemingly innocent childhood interaction with a mangofish exemplifies this process. Alan describes how 'a woman helped me pet a mangofish' that 'doesn't like to be seen' as a young child playing in the sea, which Roland connects to his sexualised reading of J.D. Salinger's 'A Perfect Day for Bananafish.'[344] Roland infers Alan has repressed the trauma of this event, suggesting 'maybe one day you should tell a therapist that little story,' but making no explicit clarification of the reasons for doing so.[345] Roland leave this ambiguous point open, other than inferring a connection to Salinger's short story: 'That woman didn't, by

[343] Filipacchi, *Love Creeps*, p. 260.
[344] Ibid., p. 146.
[345] Ibid., p. 147.

any chance, say, 'This is a perfect day for mangofish,' did she?'[346] When this turns out to be correct – 'How did you know she said that?' – Roland's outlandish reading is apparently vindicated, strengthening his claim this event also explains Alan's fear of water.[347] Yet, interestingly, Salinger's story contains no explicit sexual abuse, despite the allegory of the bananafish remaining vague.[348] By contrast, inferences of childhood sexual abuse provide a shock value that connects the novel to transgressive fictional tropes, given an unusual twist in *Love Creeps* through the absence of direct description.

Roland's interpretation of Seymour Glass, Salinger's protagonist, and Alan's interactions seeks to illicit sense from extreme sexual desire. This produces an overreading built from absence that appears closer to psychoanalysis than transgressive fiction. Inferred symbolism – the bananafish's phallic connotations, echoed by the mangofish Alan encounters – replaces explicit representations of sexual desire found in transgressive texts. Nevertheless, in Roland's reading, odd but seemingly innocent interactions are given a sinister frame of reference. Seymour's fantastical story about a greedy bananafish, told to a young girl, Sybil, floating on a raft in the sea, becomes a veiled allegory for sexual abuse. In this reading, the moment Seymour 'kissed the arch' of Sybil's foot, or when he is caught staring at a woman's feet in a hotel lift contribute to the overreading of perversion, becoming evidence of a foot fetish.[349] Roland equates Alan's experience to Sybil's: a victim of sexual assault against a minor, only with the gender roles reversed. Comparable to the phallic banana, the odd sensation of the mango fish is connected to a woman's genitalia: 'It was mushy and it had folds. And yet, in all the years since, it had not occurred to him that he had touched the woman's genitals.'[350] Roland's sexualisation of innocuous details is produced through an absence, or limit, that becomes gradually more convincing as he strings together an increasing number of anecdotal examples. This reading of Alan as a victim

[346] Ibid., p. 146.
[347] Ibid., p. 147.
[348] Antony Fassano, 'Salinger's A Perfect Day for Bananafish', *The Explicator*, 66 (3) (2008), 149-150 (pp. 149-150); Gary Lane, 'Seymour's Suicide Again: A New Reading of JD Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish"', *Studies in Short Fiction*, 10 (1) (1973), 27-33 (p. 27).
[349] J.D. Salinger, 'A Perfect Day for Bananafish', *The New Yorker*, 31st January 1948 <https://foresthillshs.enschool.org/ourpages/auto/2016/9/7/48668131/Salinger%20-%20Bananafish.pdf> [accessed 4th August 2020].
[350] Filipacchi, *Love Creeps*, p. 169.

empowers Alan by giving meaning to his otherwise meaningless failures, produced through a connection to sexual violence.

The counter-narrative Roland offers constructs and then undermines meaning, connecting it to a postmodern destabilisation of truth. After Roland's revelation, Alan claims his newfound victimhood is 'liberating and empowering,' providing a personal epiphany that justifies his shortcomings.[351] Liberation through debauchery is central to his newfound interpretation of events driven by sexual violence, connecting it to transgressive tropes:

> His sexual abuse was like religion. It explained his deficiencies, his problems, even his lack of artistic talent. All of it was the fault of that abuser. He almost felt grateful to her. Grateful that he could dump it all on her.[352]

The coherence this gives to Alan's otherwise meaningless suffering becomes integral to the belief system he constructs. His pursuit of meaning leads him to cling to sexual violence as a way of producing it, inverting the conventional approach of transgressive fiction where meaning is *given to* acts of sexual violence rather than *derived from* them. This reconfigures the liberating potential of sexual desire associated with transgressive fiction, but retains a connection between meaningless suffering and attempts to construct meaning through it. While transgressive fiction commonly recounts sexual desire in explicit detail, meaning is produced for Alan through an excess of desire constructed from an absence of these explicit sexual references. Interestingly, when Alan confronts his mother's neighbour, Miss Turtle, his discovery that she 'did have a mangofish' undermines the troubling narrative of victimhood empowerment he constructs.[353] By claiming 'there is no such thing as a bananafish,' but that her mangofish exists, Miss Turtle disrupts Alan's narrative, distinguishing it from Roland's sexualised reading of Salinger's story.[354] While this revelation should be positive, by reinstating meaningless failure, it leads to Alan's most disconcerting statement in the novel: 'most troubling of all, my childhood sexual abuser never abused me, which

[351] Ibid., p. 170.
[352] Ibid., p. 169.
[353] Ibid., p. 195.
[354] Ibid., p. 194.

means there is no explanation for any of this, other than that I am a born loser.'[355] This discovery problematises the scene's connection to sexual desire, replacing it with both an absence of desire and meaning. In doing so, it produces an excess of desire that is read into the scene, which both extends and undermines Sontag's description of transgressive fiction.

By reading depravity into an innocent scene, Roland inverts Sontang's attempts to rationalise sexual depravity in transgressive fiction. Instead, he draws upon sexual desire to explain otherwise meaningless events. Roland's account is eventually falsified, but the novel recounts his harrowing reading nonetheless, giving it an existence built from its imaginary status. Waste is therefore central to Filipacchi's subversion of Sontag's position: where the excess of desire read into the scene, used to create sense, is ultimately unproductive. This also implicitly undermines attempts to rationalise representations of sexual desire – or, in other words, make them productive. Yet, rather than making representations of sexual desire redundant, *Love Creeps* produces the opposite effect. An absence of depravity uses an excess of desire to produce a form of waste, recalibrating the subversive feature of transgressive fiction in a distinct and significant way.

Absence – of knowledge, of mutual gratification, of explicit participation – in *Love Creeps* produces a reconsideration how sexual desire can be used to critique capitalist excess. Transgressive fiction's liberation of desire is mediated by the systemic excesses of contemporary capitalism. It therefore becomes imperative to consider the impact upon textual representations of sexual desire. *Love Creeps* continues the contradictory and self-reflexive representation of desire found in *American Psycho*. It presents an excess of desire shaped by absence as a way of thinking through capitalism's fluid forms of dominance arising from its deregulation of desire. Instead of a gratuitous celebration, the novel's recurring integration of absence positions desire's partial restriction as subverting advanced capitalism's commodification of transgressive desire. Nevertheless, absence is also integral to the escalated brutality and depravity of these encounters, representing an excess of desire that is both extreme and unproductive, but in a way that accounts for this shifting relation between capitalism and

[355] Ibid., p. 200.

desire. Absences of desire, gratification, and coherent positioning underpin the novel's representations of depravity, forging a connection to wasteful or unproductive desire that extends transgression's subversive features. *Love Creeps* repositions desire as a waste that cannot be fully absorbed by advanced capitalism. By considering the unproductive features of desire – or, an excess of desire – through restriction, the novel foregrounds and recalibrates the contradictory limit of their relationship.

Poverty & Ecology: An Excess of Desire in the Shadow of Global Recession

Sadie: The Sadist mobilises an excess of desire to critique the waste of consumer capitalism in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. By associating waste with advanced capitalism's overproduction, the novel complicates its subversive role through ecological concerns that extend the waste Bataille presents through sexual perversity. For Bataille, 'sexual reproduction is, together with eating and death, one of the great luxurious detours that ensure the intense consumption of energy,' transferring this energy from 'growth for himself' to 'the impersonality of life.'[356] This complicates the apparently productive features of these processes – nutritional consumption and procreation, for example – reflecting the text's connection between reuse and an excess of desire. Sexual desire provides a means of producing waste through reuse, partly absorbing the waste of consumer culture's excess to produce an excess of desire that remains unproductive. In *Sadie*, waste foregrounds the environmental limits imposed upon advanced capitalist excess through an unproductive excess of desire, extending this shift from the interior to the exterior in American postmodern fiction.

Sachs' novel appropriates the narrative template of *American Psycho*, but contrasts Bateman's deregulated desire with the restrictions imposed upon Sadie. Her financial precarity – 'I figure there're two paychecks [sic] between me and the homeless shelter' – of working a dead-end job during a global recession constricts her expressions of desire in ways unimaginable to Bateman.[357] This is furthered by a patriarchal oppression and ecological awareness that remains alien to the masculine

[356] Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p. 35.
[357] Zané Sachs, *Sadie: The Sadist* (N.P.: CreateSpace, 2014), p. 33.

Reaganomics of *American Psycho*. *Sadie* presents different features of capitalist excess, moving away from what Howard Davies calls the 'banker centred narrative' of the financial crash that Bateman embodies.[358] This shifts the text's focus towards the impact rather than the cause of capitalist excess, presenting the consequences instead of exploring alternatives to it in a way that also integrates the limits of radical transformation. Waste is both a by-product of capitalist excess and integral to Sadie's subversion of this systemic framework through her sexual desire, where reuse produces an excess of desire that foregrounds ecological limitations. Reuse undermines the waste Sadie aligns with consumerism, contrasting her excess of desire with the uneconomical resource expenditure of her employer. Instead of absence, Sachs' novel makes physical limitations a mediator of sexual desire, producing unproductive subversion through an excess of desire.

The 2008 financial crash shapes the way representations of sexual desire stage critiques of capitalist excess. Thomas Piketty presents the crash as an inevitability of the deregulation of eighties Reaganomics: 'Left to itself, capitalism, because it is profoundly unstable and inegalitarian, leads naturally to catastrophes.'[359] *Sadie* extends an inability to imagine radically transforming advanced capitalism. Its undermined validity intensifies advanced capitalism's post-Cold War dominance, integrating ecological concerns and the economic instabilities produced by market fluctuations as limits to its excess. Harry Shutt describes a creeping disillusionment since the eighties where 'it started to become clear that the neoliberal experiment was failing to deliver its promised benefits,' which was intensified in the post-2008 cultural climate.[360] *Sadie* responds to this awareness of limits – both economic deregulation and environmental – representing them through Sadie's excess of desire and how it is shaped by constriction. Christian Marazzi calls the 2008 financial crash 'the crisis of crises,' foregrounding a violent instability that provides a way of 'questioning the very limits of capitalism.'[361] Comparably, *Sadie* explores the limits of both subversive and systemic

[358] Davies, *Can Financial Markets Be Controlled?*, p. 19.
[359] Piketty, *Chronicles*, p. 50.
[360] Harry Shutt, *Beyond the Profits System: Possibilities For a Post-Capitalist Era* (London & New York: Zed Books, 2010), p. 38.
[361] Marazzi, *The Violence of Financial Capitalism*, p. 10.

excess, where neither can sustain the liberating potential previously attached to transgressive desire and deregulate advanced capitalism.

Sadie personifies the impact of advanced capitalism's wasteful systemic excesses. Her disillusionment with her social immobility is intensified by frayed relationships with her bosses, her financially precarious situation, and her inability to escape it. As an employee of an American supermarket corporation, her relative poverty is juxtaposed against the surplus of goods with which she is surrounded. Sadie's dissatisfaction with her monotonous and exploitative minimum wage job exemplifies an entrapment within a wider capitalist system, emphasising micro and macro levels of discontent. Sadie's financial restrictions contrasts the relative affluence of Lynn and Bateman, shaping her excess of desire's distinct relation to both limitation and waste. The extreme representations of Sadie's desire – including sexual violence, murder, cannibalism, and food-based masturbation – more explicitly present waste as a form of systemic excess. An excess of desire is produced through a shift in the function of waste, integrating usefulness as a form of subversion that intensifies textual representations of sexual desire.

The novel presents systemic excess through the waste of food production, extending it beyond an economic surplus produced by the financial sector. Elaine Graham-Leigh suggests 'The harm which capitalism does with agriculture arises from the way it treats the production of food – living things – as just another commodity to be traded.'[362] The novel's supermarket setting represents this wasteful commodification, depicting an industry 'whose business model is based on procedures which entail wastage.'[363] The supermarket's food waste policy demonstrates corporate excess, where both produce and employees become commodities. Sadie asks her assistant manager, Justus, if she can buy a discounted chicken instead of it being thrown out. In Sadie's words, he 'looked at me like I'd suggested he rob a bank,' reminding her this was against company policy, before 'he tossed a dozen chickens into the compactor.'[364] To sell the chicken at a discount price undermines its value as a full price commodity.

[362] Graham-Leigh, *A Diet of Austerity*, p. 170.
[363] Ibid., p. 146.
[364] Sachs, *Sadie*, p. 11.

As Graham-Leigh argues, supermarkets 'run the risk of losing either customers who could pay for it, but chose to wait until it is deemed 'wasted', or the exclusive image of high-end products if they are given out at the end of their sell-by dates to those who wouldn't otherwise be able to pay for the privilege.'[365] Although Graham-Leigh describes giving food away for free, this is also true of discounted food, like the chicken Sadie requests, since it similarly undermines the implied commercial value of the product. The minimal additional profits do not outweigh an ability to maintain its status, desirability and economic value through scarcity. Its value is maintained through waste, making waste a systemic excess that protects the commodity's status at Sadie's expense. Yet, Sadie is also viewed as a commodity, judged by the value she can bring the store's products, rather than as a person with limited expenditure resulting from her meagre wages. Sadie's excess of desire provides her with a comparable but opposing form of self-protection. Like absence in *Love Creeps*, which produces a waste that remains economically unquantifiable, Sadie's excess of desire represents an unproductivity that resists her subjective commodification. Instead of protecting the economic worth of the products that align meaning with economic value, the sexual waste produced in the text provides Sadie with a value that is not purely or primarily economically quantifiable. In this scene waste is politicised; not as an unproductive excess that resists absorption, but as an economically productive systemic waste against which Sadie's excess of desire is positioned.

Nicolas Bourriaud recalibrates the unproductive by presenting waste as a central feature of contemporary capitalist society. For him, waste 'reveals the *real* of globalism: a world haunted by the spectre of what is unproductive or unprofitable.'[366] For this reason, Bourriaud claims 'Waste, what the process of production leaves behind, has assumed a predominant position in politics, economy and culture.'[367] Waste therefore cannot be viewed as purely subversive as Bataille infers, since it must also account for the increasing levels of waste advanced global capitalism produces, and the ecological impact it causes. Although *Fight Club* provides a bridging text in this shift from the

[365] Graham-Leigh, *A Diet of Austerity*, p. 157.
[366] Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Exform*, trans. by Erik Butler (London & New York: Verso, 2016), p. viii.
[367] Ibid., p. 97.

internal to external focus of American postmodern fiction, it continues to depict a capitalist system that is perpetually able to reabsorb and reuse waste. This is exemplified by Project Mayhem's soap production, where waste is perpetually recycled to produce further profits. Even Bateman's excessive desire is ultimately harnessed, perpetuating the systemic excesses of advanced capitalism that he is unable to escape, as is the violence of the Parisian dissidents in *Empire of the Senseless*. In contrast, waste in *Sadie* and *Love Creeps* emphasises a strain of unproductivity through limitation, producing an excess of desire that is not economically rationalised, but which also cannot provide radical social transformation. Bourriaud aligns this insight with the production of art more generally through the limited impact it has upon capitalism's ideological dominance, replacing radical transformation with a resistance internal to its systemic framework. This informs his assertion that 'The position artists take are all the more extreme because no one believes that they can have the slightest effect on the real, which is cemented by ideology.'[368] Although not discussed explicitly by Bourriaud, the escalated extremity he describes is connected to representations of violence and sexual desire in the novels discussed thus far. For Filipacchi and Sachs, this escalation incorporates limits imposed upon capitalist excess as well as radical transformation to produce subversion through a wasteful excess of desire.

Sadie produces an excess of desire through a quasi-recycling of food, countering the supermarket's waste by subverting the value created through waste. At various points throughout the novel, Sadie uses food-based sex toys to masturbate at work. In one instance, while working at the salad bar, Sadie describes how 'I squeeze my thighs together, sucking in the cucumber,' reaching climax, and 'toss the half-cooked cuke into the colander.'[369] Frustrations with her workplace exploitation and boredom inform Sadie's perverse rebellion, producing an excess of desire through her entwinement of waste and reuse. Sadie sullies the cucumber before it can be sold, making it unusable in a way that echoes the Narrator/Tyler's sabotaging of food in *Fight Club*. Although this seemingly accelerates the supermarket's creation of waste, she refuses to throw it out. The cucumber not only finds an additional use as a sex toy, but it subverts the

[368] Ibid., p. 68.
[369] Sachs, *Sadie*, p. 137.

supermarket's waste policy through Sadie's defiant act. Her act becomes more obscenely subversive by rejecting a waste policy that exemplifies capitalism's systemic excess, undermining their rules to increase the company's profits. Yet, it is not only that the company unknowingly make unsellable items viable commodities, rather than unsold fresh items waste.

By masturbating at work, Sadie's sexual desire explicitly prevents her from generating economic value for the supermarket, even if only briefly. It generates no surplus value for the company during the hours in which her actions are entirely rationalised on these terms. The corporate unproductivity of her sexual gratification makes it a form of waste that counteracts Sadie's reuse of food, outweighing the value generated by not wasting the cucumber. The entwinement of exploitation and subversion within representations of waste is exemplified by this act of masturbation. She is penetrated by the food the company would rather throw away than sell her at a discounted price, inferring the dominance global corporate capitalism has over her. Yet, she also asserts her autonomy through an act of sexual gratification on company time, which undermines their productivity and the commodities' quality. Instead of presenting sexual desire as singularly liberating like more conventional transgressive fiction, here waste combines an excess of desire that cannot be fully commodified with inferred ecological limits that restrict the systemic excess of advanced capitalist. This entwinement of polarised forms of waste stages the novel's ecologically aware critiques of globalised capitalism through representations of reuse, inferring a connection to recycling.

Sadie contains a more explicit reference to recycling through cooking recipes, where cannibalism enables Sadie to dispose of her victims more efficiently. Recipe chapters appear throughout the novel, echoing the music review chapters included in *American Psycho*. In Ellis' novel, they illustrate capitalism's commodification and sanitisation of art, particularly the chapters on Genesis, and Huey Lewis and the News. Bateman's monologues represent capitalism's superficial commercialisation of rebellion during a period of deregulation, reinforced by the reabsorption of his unregulated excesses. By contrast, Sadie's recipes emphasise a need for frugality; partly due to her financial precariousness in a 'lousy economy,' but also a practical need of body

disposal.[370] For instance, Sadie describes saving money by eating her victims: 'The kid saved me a lot of money. Like everything else, the cost of meat has skyrocketed.'[371] Cannibalism contextualises recipe notes related to the preparation of meat – from ambiguous phrases like 'other cuts of meat,' to more direct instructions to ensure all bones are removed 'or they may be used as evidence.'[372] Sadie's cannibalism foregrounds a pragmatism unnecessary for Bateman, and infers an ecologically aware practice of reuse over wastage. However, it also remains an extreme consequence of Sadie's violent sexual desire. Where masturbation was produced by boredom, cannibalism partly extends from an amplified disillusionment Sadie experiences taken to its extreme logical conclusion. Her employer views her as a commodity no better than the foods they sell, only as a different way of producing profits. When this is combined with the constant demand to consume within advanced capitalism, the commodification of rebellion and art in *American Psycho* becomes the consumption of people in *Sadie*.

Cannibalism is simultaneously integral to Sadie's excess of desire as an intensified recycling of waste that partly resists economic value. Sadie's economically unproductive masturbation with food, intensified by the wasteful expenditure of her murdered colleagues, is amplified by her cannibalism. Her physical consumption is both dramatically ceremonial and entirely mundane and practical, while symbolically their transmutation into commodities generates no direct economic value. More troublingly, when her acts of cannibalism are viewed as recycling, they merge ethical waste reduction with taboo consumption, both of which resist economic value and systemic waste linked to capitalist excess. This collapse of the distinction between ethical and unethical positions, where ecological limits produce and intensify an excess of desire, foregrounds the complex eco-criticism produced through depictions of waste and consumption.

Sadie's cannibalism provides an extreme subjective metaphor for the systemic ecological issues of ethical consumption and waste reduction. Graham-Leigh aligns a 'wealth of moral significance' with contemporary perceptions of food consumption.[373]

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[370] Ibid., p. 39.
[371] Ibid., p. 87.
[372] Ibid., pp. 46, 47.
[373] Graham-Leigh, *A Diet of Austerity*, p. 172.

She describes a cultural shift that 'imposes a particular approach to climate issues based on individual rather than collective action,' shifting the responsibility from systemic to individual change.[374] Sadie's consumption intertwines ethical and unethical practices – cannibalism with recycling, red meat consumption with a reduced carbon footprint – that troublingly limits her environmental impact through extreme violence extending from her sexual desire. This is exemplified by recipes that increasingly foreground sexual organs, ranging from '2 pounds of testicles' to '1 pound penises (I prefer fresh over frozen)' or the 'Come (to taste)' used in the aphrodisiac ragout.[375] These later references invert Sadie's masturbation with food, making sexual organs into food rather than food into sexual organs, but where both are used interchangeably. The connection between cannibalism, waste and reuse generates a disturbing productivity that resists economic value. This produces an excess of desire that is used to symbolise an array of environmental issues, reflecting the material limits advanced capitalism ultimately must confront. Slavoj Žižek summarises the tension arising between expansive personal freedoms and the natural world the novel confronts, stating that 'The limitation of our freedom that becomes palpable with global warming is the paradoxical outcome of the very exponential growth of our freedom and power.'[376] The limits of both individual freedom and systemic excess, perpetuated through deregulation, are challenged through the excess of desire depicted by Sadie, produced through ecological limits and waste reuse that resist economic quantification.

Limits not only facilitate Sadie's unproductive and wasteful excess of desire, but also represent external factors that restrict her behaviour. Her need to avoid detection during her violent outbursts provides the clearest example of a limitation, though one that counterintuitively helps or only partially inhibit her reprehensible actions. For example, Sadie's first murder replaces explicit violence with descriptions of detailed planning. Sadie's admits that she 'can be impulsive, but sometimes it's best to wait, best to make a plan,' reinforced by researching how to remove forensic evidence online.[377] Even more graphic moments prioritise planning over the gratuitous descriptions of the

[374] Ibid., p. 50.
[375] Sachs, *Sadie*, pp. 65, 178, 179.
[376] Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London & New York: Verso, 2011), p. 333.
[377] Sachs, *Sadie*, p. 45.

act, such as Sadie's plan 'to fillet Justus (if not fillets, pieces: legs, thighs, wings), then I'll deposit the parts into the trash bags (doubled to avoid leakage), and toss the bags into the compactor.'[378] Although subsequent killings are viscerally recounted, they continually encounter restrictions. This is exemplified by Sadie's interactions with her apartment's super intendent, who comes to investigate 'complaints about the noise,' while she dismembers a young man she had seduced.[379] Although these restrictions only partially limit Sadie's behaviour, they foreground regulations that echo the ecological and economic ones that would radically transform advanced capitalism. These limits may not explicitly produce an excess of desire that is economically unproductive, but emphasise a connection between Sadie and exterior forms of potential transformation beyond localised and subjective forms of subversion.

Sadie's unstable mental state and unreliable narration foreground the shortcomings of subversion, extending the shift from interior to exterior to locate transformative potential environmentally rather than collectively. If, as Sontag claims, 'insanity is the current vehicle of our secular myth of self-transcendence,' Sadie's unstable mental health problematises the possibility of subjective transcendence in a way comparable to Bateman.[380] For Sadie, 'nothing is distinct; one line blurs into another,' undermining her version of events, as her supposed killings unravel.[381] Her inability to distinguish hallucinatory desires from reality mirrors advanced capitalism's systemic excesses, where the immaterial economic value of goods and shares is intrinsically connected to physical reality. As the novel progresses, it transpires Sadie has not killed Justus, resulting in a further fantastical violent outburst. Yet, when the lights are turned on, instead of finding a decapitated Justus, Sadie sees 'mutilated watermelons, juice oozing from cracked rinds, bruised squash and cucumbers, smashed tomatoes.'[382] Food is again intertwined with Sadie's extreme actions, which this time increases rather than undermines the supermarket's waste, and where Sadie fails to subvert reality through a suspended disbelief. Here, Sadie's actions continue to

[378] Ibid., p. 29.
[379] Ibid., p. 83.
[380] Susan Sontag, *Illness as a Metaphor and AIDs and its Metaphors* (London & New York: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 36.
[381] Sachs, *Sadie*, p. 147.
[382] Ibid., p. 229.

combine desire and waste, but become increasingly representative of a wasteful capitalist excess. In doing so, Sadie demonstrates how she is unable to sustain the subversive quality of her excess of desire as her reliability unravels.

The novel is vague about Sadie's diagnosis, which emphasises the figurative rather than psychological role her mental health plays in the novel's critique of capitalist excess. Her therapist, Marcus, offers an initial diagnoses of Borderline Personality Disorder, which is later amended to Anti-Social Personality Disorder. This changing diagnosis is situated alongside textual allusions to psychopathy and sociopathy, destabilising a rationalised understanding of her mental state. Sadie's unreliable narration of events also throws any conclusive diagnosis into question, but this is of limited importance. What remains significant is the connection between Sadie's sexual desire, her poor mental health, and a wasteful capitalist society that exploits and disillusions her. Sadie's reflection upon her mental health reinforces this when she asks, 'What if I'm as sane as you?'[383] Her suffering and desire for escapism underpins a common experience, foregrounding the under-represented working class Americans excluded from Bateman's affluent disillusionment in *American Psycho*. Despite the inconclusive diagnosis, Sadie's actions align her with the allegorical uses of sociopathy Adam Kotsko describes:

> The fantasy of the sociopath, then, represents an attempt to escape from the inescapably *social* nature of human experience. The sociopath is an individual who transcends the social, who is not bound by it in any gut-level way and *who can therefore use it* purely as a tool.[384]

Although this is partly true of Sadie, she fails to freely manipulate the advanced capitalist system that produced her. She cannot transcend a socio-economic system with no outside, and can only temporarily subvert rather than supersede the cultural practices that dictate her behaviour. Furthermore, her limited prospects mean she has none of the successes that enable Bateman's unregulated expressions, though neither can transcend their lived experience of advanced capitalism. She is excluded from both

[383] Ibid., p. 232.
[384] Adam Kotsko, *Why We Love Sociopaths: A Guide to Late Capitalist Television* (Winchester & Washington: Zero Books, 2012), p. 9.

her fantastical escapism, and the systemic excesses against which she positions this desired transcendence. Kotsko argues that 'A broken system doesn't just reward broken people – it produces them,' though this is only partly true for Sadie.[385] She is unable to succeed on either her own or the system's terms, despite being produced by a broken system, making her an exemplar of a post-2008 American culture. Sadie foregrounds a cultural awareness of the increasing instability of an advanced capitalist system without alternative, where ideological mechanisms are intensified rather than radically transformed, underpinning the limits imposed, particularly through waste, in the novel.

Sadie's failed escapism produces a further limit that connects to the novel's implied eco-criticism of advanced capitalism. Sadie claims 'personal growth is never comfortable, especially when you're on the verge of a breakthrough,' although this amounts to nothing for Sadie.[386] This means her reference to the French Revolution juxtaposes and intensifies her failed radical transformation. When describing her disdain for one of the store managers, Sadie claims: 'This calls for action. Nothing short of revolution. Terri has nothing on Marie Antoinette. I grab the guillotine.'[387] Yet, Sadie's radical action is only imaginary, providing a desire for radical transformation that is symbolised but cannot be actualised subjectively. This underpins the significance of Sachs' confrontation of advanced capitalism's limits through ecology in the novel. It provides a limit that could bring about the radical social transformation Sadie is unable to attain subjectively, and which Abhor and the Narrator/Tyler were unable to achieve collectively. Timothy Morton connects advanced capitalism and the environment through their comparable conceptual status: 'The essence of reality is capital and Nature. Both exist in an ethereal beyond.'[388] By locating them in a conceptual beyond, opportunities to act in the present are missed, including the possibility of emphasising the existing physical limits of both the environment and advanced capitalism. Although Sadie's hallucinatory desire partly places her in a comparable beyond to the one Morton

[385] Ibid., p. 58.
[386] Sachs, *Sadie*, p. 77.
[387] Ibid., p. 175.
[388] Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 115.

describes, her failure to maintain this beyond returns the novel's focus to the present and the empirical ecological limits that could facilitate radical transformation.

The shortcomings of Sadie's excess of desire echo Morton's criticism of end of the world narratives, which locate violent destruction in an immaterial future space. He claims, 'By postponing doom into some future hypothetical future, these narratives inoculate us against the very real object that has intruded into ecological, social, and psychic space.'[389] The future destruction Morton describes – comparable to the violent revolutionary transformation of Acker and Palahniuk's texts – remains an immaterial ideal, limiting its impact upon present action. Therefore, like Sadie's failure to consistently subvert advanced capitalism through a wasteful and economically unquantifiable excess of desire, non-physical violence should continue to inform material reality by emphasising this explicit physical limitation. Yet, Sadie's failure is part of the message of the text, where her subversive acts foreground a physical ecological limit that implies an impending necessity for change she cannot herself actualise. The quasi-metafictional postscript titled 'Sadie's Food for Thought' poses the following questions: 'did this book make you think? Did you learn anything?'[390] By asking these questions, the text foregrounds a connection to the material rather than existing as a fictional means of escapism. These closing lines challenge the reader to consider how the excess of desire depicted in the novel stages complex critiques about the ecological and socio-economic limits of advanced capitalism through subversion and waste. In a culture shaped by environmental and financial instability, it challenges the reader to consider how these reflections can shift from the immaterial violence represented in the novel to concrete practices that could facilitate the radical transformation the text infers.

An excess of desire uses waste and reuse to stage reflections on the financial and ecological limits posed by a post-2008 cultural climate in *Sadie*. The novel politicises waste through depictions of sexual desire, recalibrating its subversive potential by aligning it with forms of reuse. Sadie is unable to liberate herself from advanced capitalism through the subversive power of waste shaped by reuse. This is echoed by the inference that advanced capitalism is similarly unable to liberate itself

[389] Ibid., pp. 103-104.
[390] Sachs, *Sadie*, p. 246.

from ecological disaster through either systemic excess, or located forms of recycling. Both forms of excess are shaped by limitation; explicitly for Sadie, and implicitly for advanced capitalism. In challenging the reader to consider the material implications of the novel, it attempts to shift the limits of advanced capitalism from implied to explicit limits. Waste confronts this limitation in the text, expanding upon Bataille's unproductive subversion through unproductive perversity by connecting it to ecologically informed forms of reuse. The corporate supermarket intertwines systemic and personal, literal and figurative, forms of consumption and waste to stage representations of a subversive excess of desire in the novel. Waste's systemic and subversive entwinement reflects the critiques made of transgressive desire's collusion with advanced capitalism's excess. Yet, there is one central distinction: while this connection between capitalist and transgressive desire undermined its earlier critical position, the connection between waste and recycling strengthens *Sadie*'s critical angle. The novel's shift in emphasis from liberation to limitation constricts systemic and subversive forms of excess, but in doing so, foregrounds a systemic rather than individual or collective form of potential radical transformation.

Conclusion

These novels repeat and relocate features of postmodernism within twenty-first century concerns, attempting to reinvigorate the critical potential of transgressive desire. Although extreme representations of sexual desire and violence have undoubtedly not lost their shock value, the perceived collusion between subversive and systemic excess have problematised their use. Instead of providing pure liberation or subversion through sexual desire and waste, Filipacchi and Sachs' novels provide self-reflexive critiques of these tools that foreground their systemic entanglement. In doing so, they combine familiar tropes connected to American postmodernism, particularly the explosion of transgressive fiction in the nineties, with postmodern reflections upon the failures of radical transformation. Where this sub-genre of nineties American fiction partly appropriated a French literary tradition to stage its critiques of social values through extreme forms of sexual desire, *Love Creeps* and *Sadie: The Sadist* similarly

appropriate this moment in American postmodern history. Their repetition of postmodern literary tropes stage critiques of advanced capitalism that account for the collapse of transgression, the post-2008 economic instability, and ecological concerns with waste. The excess of desire these novels produce is therefore not derived from purely deregulated expressions of sexual desire, but relies upon forms of limitation to stage critiques of capitalist excess through the texts' most disturbing scenes. They attempt to account for both the formerly vital transgressive tropes, combined with an awareness of advanced capitalism's comparably unbridled excesses. Instead of dismissing postmodern conceptions of sexual desire, they use postmodern insights into the limits of radical transformation and subversive/systemic entanglement to re-invigorate this critical literary trope.

Their depiction of unproductive waste is central to their repetition of postmodernism, mobilising this form of subversion to express twenty-first century concerns. They represent a further transition in the shift from interiority to exteriority: from a collective of individuals attempting radical transformation to de-personalised environmental factors potentially instigating it. Neither novel is optimistic of this transformation being achieved, extending a postmodern cynicism, but illustrate how this recurring failure seeks out increasingly de-individualised means that could be successful. The novels' disillusionment responds to and is shaped by a consumer culture that monopolises individuals' desires through uninhibited capitalist excesses. Hence, each represents a continually unsurpassable advanced capitalist framework and attempts to subvert it through an excess of desire differently. *Love Creeps* depicts a relatively stable construct, where absence seeks to limit the unregulated and unchallenged successes of consumer culture. Representations of waste present an excess of desire that goes beyond the limits of capitalist rationalisation, where waste remains a similarly stable concept that stages the text's subversion of capitalist excess through absence as a form of limitation. By contrast, *Sadie* is shaped by economic and ecological instability, complicating the discredited validity of a perpetually dominant advanced capitalism, combined with a subversion that is comparably destabilised. Here, an excess of desire is produced from the reuse of consumer waste, which must account for the entanglement of systemic excesses of unproductive waste alongside a

comparably economically unproductive sexual desire. Both texts fundamentally rely upon subversion as a pragmatic response to the failure of radical transformation previously outlined, repeating and updating postmodern conventions to emphasise their contemporary use. Filipacchi and Sachs' contradictory methods of subversion, derived from waste and limitation, exemplify a continued inability to radically transform advanced capitalism, despite its increasing instability. The novels exemplify how discrete cultural shifts in advanced capitalism intersect with textual representations of extreme sexual desire, extending the vitality of postmodernism into twenty-first century American culture through self-reflexive repetition.

4. Surpassing Postmodernism? Digital Technology & Counter-Intuitive Repetition in *God Jr.* and *Zac's Control Panel*

For Dennis Cooper, postmodern repetition becomes an apparently counter-intuitive process of replication rather than one of revitalisation. Digital technology is integral to *God Jr.* (2005) and *Zac's Control Panel* (2015), exemplifying Cooper's attempt to break away from postmodernism through a regenerated avant-garde aesthetic. Yet, instead of producing new forms of experimentation, these works repeat established artistic conventions and methodologies under the guise of digital innovation. *God Jr.*'s conventional tale of grief is conducted within a video game, allegorising mourning through a digital adaptation that undermines radical emotional transformation. The GIFs in *Zac's Control Panel* produce forms of abstraction that repeat a range of established twentieth century art practices, repeating postmodern aesthetics and conventions digitally. Postmodernism shapes Cooper's use of video games and GIFs in both works, producing a tension between his rejection of its aesthetics and his repetition of its conventions. His inability to break from postmodernism is a partial consequence of his narrow definition of postmodernism as an aesthetic style, rather than a set of ingrained cultural practices. By framing postmodernism in this way, he overlooks how this cultural integration of postmodernism is a reshaping of its functionality, rather than simply a diminishing vitality of experimental form. This disjuncture between the vitality of postmodern aesthetics and its cultural integration is fundamental to its contemporary cultural repetition, suggesting that cultural shifts do not necessitate the succession of postmodernism.

In this chapter, I argue that Cooper's work should be read against his definition of postmodernism to better understand how its legacy is repeated, rather than innovated and succeeded, digitally. His claim that postmodernism had become 'avant-bland fiction' by the early nineties have made it commonplace and therefore passé, meaning its techniques 'are just there now, demystified, givens.'[391] Yet, this apparent contemporary

[391] Dennis Cooper, 'No Mo' Pomo', in *Smothered in Hugs: Essays, Interviews, Feedback, and Obituaries* (New York & London: Harper Perennial, 2010), pp. 31-32, (p. 32).

irrelevance of postmodernism stands counter to Cooper's work, where what he presents as radical innovations fail to distinguish his work from postmodernism. Instead of the narrow definition he provides, postmodernism's reach extends beyond simply a style of canonised fiction that, for Cooper, has lost its vitality. Specifically, its cynicism towards radical transformation remains integral to Cooper's stylistic construction of his work in ways he fails to perceive. From his presentation of *God Jr.* as 'idealizing a videogame,' to the replacement of prose with Graphic Interchange Format (GIF) images in *Zac's Control Panel*, Cooper presents digital technology as a way of radicalising experimentation and succeeding postmodernism.[392] However, an interrogation of these works outlines their failure to achieve this innovation of the American novel. His use of video games and GIFs, exemplars of nineties American technology, suggest an inability to step outside a postmodern view of the world he claims to reject. Cooper's counter-intuitive repetition of postmodern features foregrounds a failure to grasp a complexity beyond the narrow definition he provides as justification for its succession.

This repetition of postmodernism is integral to Cooper's use of digital technology in these works. In *God Jr.*, Jim, the novel's protagonist, is unable to integrate his intentions with the structure of the video game, as his repetition of a trauma he seeks to escape is at odds with the functionality of the video game's conventions. His failure to stage alternative forms of narrative construction within the game, distinct from the trauma he attempts to detach from, means he repeats his grief within this digital template. The textual emphasis upon repetition is integral to both Jim's digital repetition of his trauma and Cooper's repetition of postmodernism, making the absence of radical transformation integral to both features of the text. *Zac's Control Panel*'s replacement of prose with moving images seems more experimental, but repeats Robert Coover's provocative claim that hypertext fiction's use of digital technology potentially replaces the conventional novel.[393] Cooper describes encountering 'a weird crossroads with fiction,' around the time he integrates digital technology into his work. [394] Yet, instead of

[392] Danny Kennedy, ''It's the Shift That Creates': An Interview With Dennis Cooper, 12 July 2007', in *Dennis Cooper: Writing at the Edge*, ed. by Paul Hegarty and Danny Kennedy (Brighton & Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2008), pp. 191-209, (p. 198).
[393] Coover, 'The End of Books'.
[394] Kennedy, 'It's the Shift That Creates', p. 192.

innovation, Cooper repeats Coover's early nineties insight – notably, from a postmodern American author – through distinctly postmodern techniques (fragmentation, pastiche, metafiction). This emphasises the novel's conservative rather than innovative use of postmodernism, where the looped images Cooper draws upon present postmodernism as a denied but persistent continuum in his work. Overall, I argue these works exemplify Cooper's failure to succeed postmodernism, counter-intuitively repeating its conventions through digital media, rather than reworking or surpassing it.

My analysis of Cooper's work extends the shift from an internal to an external focus in twenty-first century postmodern fiction. However, instead of focusing upon collective action or environmental concerns, it prioritises digital culture. This emphasis locates the shift towards exteriority within the works' form, despite them thematically remaining deeply introspective. Cooper's intensification of postmodern conventions resonates with the accelerationism aligned with Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*. In contrast, Cooper's more contemporary works integrate their repetition of postmodernism into their form, rather than their continued prescience producing a repetition in contemporary American culture. This textual repetition of postmodernism does not revitalise these conventions like *Love Creeps* and *Sadie: The Sadist*, but emphasises a failure to surpass them. *God Jr.* and *Zac's Control Panel* counter-intuitively repeat the conventions of postmodernism Cooper attempts to distance himself from, emphasising a discrete repetition connected to failure that advances an argument for postmodernism's persistence. Cooper represents a failure to think beyond a postmodern framework, providing a case study that examines the distinction between perceived and actual transformation.

Mourning the Absence of Radical Transformation: Grief & Postmodernism in *God Jr.*

God Jr. exemplifies Cooper's perceived departure from postmodernism through a lack of radical transformation of emotions staged within a digital world. Jim uses a video game to escape his grief after the death of his son, Tommy, eventually admitting, 'I accidentally killed my son, and I'm too scared or egotistical to face it.'[395] He perceives a

[395] Dennis Cooper, *God Jr.* (New York: Black Cat, 2005), p. 160.

safety in this digital world, saying, 'I don't know why a false world made my son's death so inspiring, or why the real world is rubbed so raw because one lazy teen left it.'[396] The video game brings these two worlds together through Jim and Tommy's shared obsession with a mysterious in-game building, attempting to become closer to Tommy, while also escaping his lived trauma and the implosion of his sexless marriage. This video game replaces an inaccessible past for Jim, but essentially resituates standard representations of memorialisation and mourning within a digitised landscape, repeating rather than revolutionising these themes. One by one, the ideals Jim held – his relationship with Tommy, his marriage to Bette, his son's creative abilities, the value of the monument – collapse, intensifying rather than alleviating his experience of loss. Failure is central to the novel, combining Jim's inhibited emotional transformation with his immersion in Tommy's video game that repeats this stalling.

Although the unnamed video game is incidental to Jim's expression of grief, it is integral to the novel's depiction of absent transformation. This video game setting combines two distinct methods of narrative construction to foreground repetition within the novel. Michael Nitsche describes a spatial difference between the narratives of video games and novels, claiming that 'While the reader of a novel is limited to the given text, the player of a game interacts with these evocative elements, cocreates them, and changes them.'[397] This interactive feature of games, where spatial interactions contribute to the player's experience of the narrative, can be connected to Jim's in-game experience in *God Jr.* Jim interacts with the video game environment in a way that avoids its intended narrative, but creates his own quest that defines his discrete set of character interactions, rather than rejecting narrative construction altogether. It is only with the intention of accessing this building that Jim's bear periodically progresses through the game, but notably resolves neither narrative: he cannot access the building, and he does not complete the game conventionally. The video game stages alternative forms of narrative construction that reinforce the text's emphasis upon repetition, leaving both the intended and Jim's created in-game

[396] Ibid., p. 104.
[397] Michael Nitsche, *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Game Worlds* (Cambridge & London: The MIT Press, 2008), p. 45.

narratives unresolved. Like more open-world games, Jim has the freedom to explore the game's environment in a non-linear fashion, though this becomes a way of replicating the emotional limbo he experiences outside the game.

The video game shapes the text's narrative development, replacing the perceived quest of the game – and implicitly the novel – with an endless wandering without succession or resolution. For Jesper Juul, 'Quests in games can actually provide an interesting type of bridge between game rules and game fiction in that the game can contain a predefined sequence of events that the player then has to actualize or enact.'[398] This is partly true for Jim, as the game's physics shape the quest he produces within the game. However, this self-directed quest is not predefined by the game, producing a stalling that bridges the gap between Jim's reality and the video game he uses to escape it. Jim alters the trajectory of a game, prioritising reaching the monument over progressing through the levels, undermining the function of the game by engaging with it in a way that was not predetermined. At one point, he even imagines the game was remade entirely mid-way through production to both make it more commercial and validate his alternate use, asking himself, 'What if this monument was part of the old game that nobody noticed until it was too late?'[399] His attempts to justify his otherwise misplaced obsession seeks to create a narrative that obscures the absence of closure he perpetuates within the game. This ability to roam is built into the game's design, making it a defining feature of its gameplay, but does not advance its narrative, distinguishing his quest from the video game's conventions. The text prioritises horizontal space over linear chronological progression, allegorising both Jim's unsurpassable trauma and Cooper's counter-intuitive repetition of postmodernism. Cooper's appropriation of video games depicts a postmodern perception of the world informed by the absence of radical transformation, centralising repetition and failed escapism in both Jim's experience of grief and Cooper's continued relation to postmodernism.

[398] Jesper Juul, *Half-real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge & London: The MIT Press, 2005), p. 17.
[399] Cooper, *God Jr.*, p. 62.

The absence of transformation available to either Tommy or Jim in their recalibrated video game quest provides a new way of staging familiar postmodern ideas. The novel incorporates the video game landscape and the implied quest narrative – to access the building Jim becomes obsessed with – but to resist linear, chronological progression connected to Jim's experiences within the text. Cooper suggests the inspiration he derives from video games relates to their 'graphics and builds and spatial organizations,' connecting *God Jr.* to the aesthetics rather than the forms of narrative development associated with video games.[400] This is reinforced in the connection Cooper forges to both video games and novels, claiming: 'I really don't care about characters and plot much, either in games or in fiction, including my own.'[401] Character and plot development are side lined, integrating a postmodern absence of radical transformation with superficial characters that, for Cooper, become 'just configurations of the prose that have more power over the reader than the fiction's other components.'[402]

In *God Jr.*, this is visible through Jim's all-consuming obsession that solely defines rather than facilitates the development of his character. Although Jim would spend his time 'wishing things were different,' he remains unable or unwilling to achieve this transformation.[403] The video game provides a platform that, at least initially, offers an opportunity to make a change. However, this absence of difference is perpetuated by the sedentary experience of Jim's character, who stands at an otherwise insignificant stage, which happens to provide a clear view of the inaccessible in-game structure. Similarly, Jim's obsession means he spends much of the novel sitting and staring at a screen, mirroring the sedentary experience of the character he plays in the game. Jim attempts to progress with his own quest but fails to achieve his goals: memorialising Tommy, forgetting his guilt, or reaching the mysterious in-game structure. Jim remains in a state of perpetual repetition defined by failure, grief and confusion that resonates with Cooper's counter-intuitive repetition of postmodernism.

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[400] Drew Toal, "What Are You Playing This Weekend? Dennis Cooper, author", *gameological.com*, 25th May 2012 <gameological.com/2012/05dennis-cooper-author/index.html> [accessed 9th December 2019].
[401] Ibid.
[402] Ibid.
[403] Cooper, *God Jr.*, p. 23.

Jim's inability to move past his mourning presents an impasse comparable to Jean-François Lyotard's description of postmodernism as a form of mourning, which fundamentally defines the text's focus. The absence of radical transformation presented by postmodernism produces both a limit and a sense of loss. This loss of the potential for radical transformation, in Lyotard's words, means that 'suffering is the postmodern state of thought.'[404] The realisation that this transformation is impossible, and only change within the present framework exists, produces a 'melancholia' explained but not alleviated by this awareness.[405] Comparably, Jim's mourning is defined by a series of failures to produce new explanations that could give his life meaning, and enable him to move past his grief. This is also true of Cooper, whose attempt to move past postmodernism is defined by a series of failures that result in a repetition distinct from radical transformation. Essentially, Cooper's retreat into digital technology facilitates an escape from a comparable process of mourning to Jim. What Jim calls being 'quote-unquote obsessed' transposes from his construction of the monument to the building that inspired it, suggesting his fixation is upon a grief he cannot confront, rather than the in-game structure.[406]

The monument Jim builds as a tribute to Tommy's memory exemplifies this connection between mourning and absent transformation. Naomi Mandel articulates a need to confront the unspoken as an ethical act that facilitates an appropriate engagement with traumatic events, claiming that 'speaking the unspeakable forces the painful confrontation with a deep-rooted *complicity*.'[407] However, Jim's inability to confront his responsibility for Tommy's death, after crashing into a tree while inebriated, stands counter to this. His admission that he 'wanted Tommy's death to last forever' prioritises his memorialisation over speaking the unsayable, avoiding his responsibility by escaping into the preservation of Tommy's memory.[408] From the construction of the monument, to the futile attempt to reach it in the game, the novel becomes a way of

[404] Jean-François Lyotard, 'A Postmodern Fable', in *Postmodern Debates*, ed. by Simon Malpas (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 21.
[405] Ibid.
[406] Cooper, *God Jr.*, p. 5.
[407] Naomi Mandel, 'Rethinking "After Auschwitz": Against a Rhetoric of the Unspeakable in Holocaust Writing', *Boundary 2*, 28 (2) (2001), 203-228 (p. 217).
[408] Cooper, *God Jr.*, p. 44.

indirectly engaging with what Jim is otherwise unable to adequately confront. Therefore, although Jim appropriates the video game platform, this is incidental rather than integral, echoing Cooper's use of digital technology in an attempt to surpass postmodernism.

The only instances where the unsayable is spoken further Jim's escapism into the video game landscape, rather than producing an ethical reflection upon his actions. The monument he builds based on Tommy's drawing initially receives local media attention, providing a notoriety that is quickly undermined by the confession of Mia, Tommy's girlfriend. Mia admits she made the drawings, copied from an in-game building Tommy was obsessed with. She justifies her hesitancy in telling Jim about his misunderstanding by stating, 'when you thought he did my drawings, you seemed so proud.'[409] Yet, rather than being a distressing revelation, this confession simply shifts Jim's focus from 'the monument-in-progress' that remains unfinished to the in-game quest he never resolves in a video game he never completes.[410] This absence of origins connected to digital technology empties it of its signification, obscuring any message it intended to convey, much like the Baudrillardian hyperreal connected to *Zac's Control Panel*. Eventually, the monument catches fire, but this represents a repetition of failure rather than a specifically traumatic event for Jim, much like his inability to rekindle his relationship with Bette. The discovery of the drawings' origins centralises video games in the text, but otherwise proves to be little more than an extension of Jim's unresolved attempts to digitally repress his trauma. The novel ends with Jim's continued denial, where each sentence in this closing section begins with 'Let's say.' This denial culminates in his claim that Tommy's 'gift' to him was the ability to forget: 'Let's say he gave me the power to erase the night I killed him and lost the game by accident.'[411] The emphasis placed upon saying suggests an attempt to articulate the unspeakable, but proves to be another digression that reinforces his continued avoidance. This exemplifies Jim's attempts to repress his trauma, perpetuating a repetitive experience

[409] Ibid., p. 35.
[410] Ibid., p. 16.
[411] Ibid., p. 163.

he lives with outside the video game, echoing a Lyotardian mourning that stands in for radical transformation.

The relation between death and the unsayable in *God Jr.* reinforces the novel's connection to Cooper's earlier, more explicitly postmodern, works. Mandel suggests silence 'maintains its position as safely distant, conceptually and ethically, from this "unspeakable" event,' assuming a counter-intuitive conventional ethical position through what remains unsaid that must be challenged.[412] Jim's inability to escape or fully confront the trauma of his responsibility in Tommy's death becomes a similar position of safety, protecting him from the full psychological and emotional impact of the event. An inarticulable relation to death is central to many of Cooper's novels, reinforcing a connection between *God Jr.* and postmodernism, even if the text's depiction of death is notably altered. In *Frisk*, Dennis describes a profound 'un-knowableness' that makes his extremely violent fantasy 'incommunicable.'[413] Although Jim's relation to death is neither as graphic nor as celebratory, this is because he distances himself from the event to protect himself ethically and emotionally. While Dennis accepts he cannot ethically kill someone, and so cannot directly experience his fantasy, Jim is unable to fully accept his role in Tommy's death. Therefore, although both Dennis and Jim's virtual worlds are defined by death, Dennis' provides the only way he can access his violent desire, while for Jim it provides the only way he can attempt to escape from his son's death.

Part of Jim's rejection of the game's narrative derives from his rejection of the violence that is integral to its gameplay. The avoidance of his trauma is repeated through Jim's attempts to civilise the characters, particularly the bear protagonist: 'We tried to domesticate the bear. We gave him our values.'[414] Jim's unwillingness to kill other creatures in the game makes the inaccessible building his only focus, shaping his in-game autonomy distinct from the conventional video game narrative. Janet Murray states, 'One form of agency not dependent on game structure yet characteristic of digital environments is spatial navigation,' connecting Jim's focus upon spatial

[412] Mandel, 'Rethinking "After Auschwitz"', p. 224.
[413] Dennis Cooper, *Frisk* (New York & London: Serpent's Tail, 1992), p. 78.
[414] Cooper, *God Jr.*, p. 61.

environment to an attempt to assert his autonomy.[415] Essentially, Jim's agency is defined by inaction, distinguishing his quest from the game's structure by prioritising spatial awareness over the pre-defined narrative progression of the game.

This rejection of violence echoes Cooper's own search for autonomy, attempting to distinguish his writing from postmodern texts defined by hyper-violence and sexual debauchery, suggesting an authorial maturation. In *Frisk*, for example, the text revolves around this sexualised idea of 'dying metaphorically,' expressed by the protagonist named Dennis, and the series of repetitive variations on this theme he recounts.[416] By contrast, *God Jr.* rejects this explicit indulgence of violent descriptions, but remains shaped by death as a similarly foundational, driving textual feature. More importantly, it provides a way for Jim to deflect and repeat his trauma over his responsibility in Tommy's death, making repetition within the game representative of his emotional stasis. Jim's in-game adaptation of the gameplay allegorises his traumatic impasse through digressions that obstruct conventional notions of progress, while also providing indirect ways of engaging with this trauma. Yet, when these features are returned to in his subsequent works, this temporary shift becomes a further example of Cooper's failure to surpass postmodernism.

Jim's immersion within the video game appears to offer a retreat from reality, but instead plays out the features of his lived experience he cannot confront. His attempts to become closer to Tommy sees him replace speaking about his guilt with the creation of narratives to mythologise his deceased son. Initially, this is done through the construction of the monument in Tommy's artistic memory, and then by fabricating a hidden meaning for the same in-game structure. Despite retreating into the game, both Jim and the Non-Playable Characters (NPCs) he interacts with extend this desire to mythologise a form of repetition arising from the monument that replaces Jim's admission of responsibility. His obsession with the inaccessible building leaves the NPCs in a tedious limbo of suffering, where they are left to confront their now meaningless existence. As the plant-NPC states:

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[415] Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), p. 129.
[416] Cooper, *Frisk*, p. 77.

> All I know is what [the bear's] odd behavior did to us. You'd call it maturity. We began to speculate. Why is the bear still here? He had no answers to give us, so we thought about ourselves. Why are we still here? Theories abounded.[417]

This maturity, like Cooper's apparent mature development from postmodern hyper-violence, similarly produces no new transformative potential. Unlike Jim, who is unable to confront Tommy's death directly, these NPCs are forced to endlessly confront an absence of death. The suffering of the NPCs connects to Jim's traumatic loss, where their extended life is defined by both suffering and introspective self-reflection upon this painful existence. This intertwinement of Jim's psyche and the repetitive experience of these NPCs implicitly extends the game's function beyond it's intended narrative, producing a deviation that explores grief and mourning by perpetuating it.

A lack of meaning connected to death results in the NPCs turning the bear-protagonist into a deity in an attempt to reintroduce meaning and happiness into their lives. As the cub-NPC states: 'They thought imitating you would make them happy. The sad thing is, I guess it did.'[418] Although their happiness is not sustained, it demonstrates a connection between repetition, mythological creation and happiness, which reflects Jim's actions. As with Dennis' 'idealized brutality,' the centre point of *Frisk* that he seeks to mythologise and narrate throughout the text, Jim attempts to construct meaning from a senseless violence he cannot fully comprehend.[419] Jim's description of how he 'blended with the bear' suggests a more complex use of the video game than purely escapism.[420] It continues to represent a digression from the reality of Tommy's death, but provides a way of him indirectly interacting with the very thing he cannot fully articulate. Jim's complicity arises from his inability to fully confront his responsibility in Tommy's death, seeking to distance himself from it in a way that distinguishes him from Dennis. Nevertheless, both novels are driven by a quest for understanding that cannot be reached, described or fully comprehended, reframed within a digital rather than transgressive platform. *God Jr.*'s connection to the unsayable nature of extreme violence provides a different take on a familiar postmodern theme, echoed throughout

[417] Cooper, *God Jr.*, p. 95.
[418] Ibid., p. 140.
[419] Cooper, *Frisk*, p. 78.
[420] Cooper, *God Jr.*, p. 106.

Cooper's work, where the absence of death makes it as central as the repeated graphic descriptions of it.

The dialogue of the NPCs in the novel respond to the perpetual limbo the bear produces, and therefore the narrative Jim builds around the monument. Although the lives of these NPCs are extended, what the snowman-NPC calls 'our little age of enlightenment' is defined by meaningless confusion, pain and suffering.[421] This is described by the ferret-NPC, who says:

> Between Tommy and you, the bear has been with us much too long. My program was simple, kill or be killed. I wasn't meant to live forever. I wasn't meant to think, consider, daydream, pontificate. I'm like an elderly athlete. This club I'm holding seems heavy, even if it isn't. I'm so bored. We all are. If you have any mercy, erase this game and kill us.[422]

The removal of killing has not negated the presence of death in the game, but has prolonged the suffering of the NPCs whose existence has been stripped of meaning. These NPCs grow impatient with Jim's inactivity and unwillingness to kill in the game, which has meant their lives are now defined by death's absence. Their suffering dramatises and extends in-game animations run after a period of inactivity, such as foot tapping in *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* or the head turning and chin scratching of Yoshi in *Yoshi's Island*.[423] The NPCs of Cooper's novel respond to Jim in unexpected ways, shifting from the pre-defined rules, animations, actions and interactions that shape gameplay towards hallucinatory free-form dialogue. A plant-NPC states, 'I'd kill for newness,' vocalising their desire to return to the violence that gave their existence purpose.[424] This responds directly to Jim's actions, contradicting the game's conventions to produce an impossible interaction, staging Jim's discrete concerns digitally rather than progressing through the conventional in-game narrative.

Jim's actions disrupt as much as they utilise digital technology, deviating from the game's embedded narrative design to foreground repetition and failure. Juul defines

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[421] Ibid., p. 151.
[422] Ibid., p. 86.
[423] *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*, Sega Technical Institute (Sega, 1992) [on Sega Mega Drive]; *Yoshi's Island*, Nintendo EAD (Nintendo, 1995) [on Super Nintendo Entertainment System].
[424] Cooper, *God Jr.*, p. 98.

embedded narratives through their pre-existing and rigid set of rules where, 'If the player does not perform the right actions, the game is over.'[425] Jim strays from this template. He refuses to perform the correct tasks that would enable him to progress through the game, unless they align with his own quest of reaching the monument. The video game's narrative structure is largely superfluous to his own quest, meaning his interactions with the game's NPCs cannot be reduced to pre-determined cut-scenes. The dialogue accompanying embedded narratives, conventionally expressed in full motion video (FMV) sequences, are absent from Jim's interactions. Instead, his conversations are determined by his quest to reach the monument, distinguishing his hallucinatory interactions from the game's programmed narrative progression.

Yet, his actions are also distinct from emergent narratives, which prioritise interaction over progression. Juul defines these as 'the primordial game structure where a game is specified as a small number of rules that combine and yield a large game tree.'[426] Although the narrative emerges from Jim's interaction with the game, it is not overtly reliant upon a specific set of rules that dictate the gameplay. By contrast, there is no collaborative or competitive multi-player interaction, just an endless repetition from which his own narrative is constructed. Jim's interactions are secondary to his impossible quest, and the rules that limit his actions relate to the game's physics, rather than offering rules that facilitate gameplay. His actions have a motive but no specific rules or process, only a specified outcome without a pre-defined structure. The impossible limit – the monument's inaccessibility – produces a narrative defined by failure, repetition and the absence of radical transformation. In doing so, Jim's in-game actions undermine the progression and rules of conventional gameplay through the text's repetition of postmodernism.

The disruption of the game's progression presents Jim's actions as a glitch, through which he constructs his own counter-narrative. This glitch functions on two levels: the existence of the monument, and Jim's repeated failure to access it. Mia describes the inaccessible building as 'only a glitch,' rather than a legitimate in-game pursuit, reinforcing this distinction between Jim and Tommy's obsession and the

[425] Juul, *Half-real*, p. 73.
[426] Ibid.

intended function of the game's landscape.[427] By describing the monument as a mistake, Mia undermines the significance placed upon it, which is echoed by Jim's actions. Towards the end of the novel, the snowman-NPC addresses Jim directly, stating, 'You're the glitch.'[428] Unlike the bear, who 'likes solving puzzles,' Jim's grief cannot be resolved within the linear rules of the game's intended structure.[429] His appropriation of the game fails to escape his trauma, repeating its features within the narrative he awkwardly constructs within its ill-fitting template, comparable to Cooper's use of digital technology to escape postmodernism. The video game template is used to avoid violence – Jim's killing of Tommy, the hyper-violence of Cooper's previous works – but it resurfaces, repeating its centrality, despite now being defined by a more overt form of absence. The absence of violence, like the absence of Tommy, defines the novel's relation of death. However, it does so without diminishing its significance, comparable to the use of absence in *Love* Creeps, instead of a repetition of gratuitous violence like in *Frisk*. The obsession played out within this digital landscape – reaching the inaccessible monument for Jim, surpassing postmodernism for Cooper – is central to this glitch that defines the absence of radical transformation. Although this glitch is partly creative – producing an unconventional in-game narrative for Jim and an anomalous text for Cooper – it remains what the plant-NPC calls 'an awful evolution.'[430] This creative act is defined by escapism, digression, failure and repetition, leaving Jim, the game's NPCs and Cooper without any closure through an act of transformation qualitatively different from what they seek to escape. Jim's lack of direction and purpose is comparable to Cooper's attempt to succeed postmodernism through digital technology, producing a glitch that repeats the failures of this absent radical transformation.

The video game provides a failed attempt to escape a realisation that cannot be confronted, producing repetitions of postmodernism within the novel. For Jim, mourning is connected to postmodernism through their shared inability to radically transform the present, resituating rather than escaping or surpassing his trauma. Like Jim's admission

[427] Cooper, *God Jr.*, p. 34.
[428] Ibid., p. 155.
[429] Ibid.
[430] Ibid., p. 96.

in the closing paragraph of the book that 'my real life was a game I didn't win,' the video game becomes both a stage and metaphor for his own shortcomings.[431] He repeatedly fails throughout the novel – to memorialise his son, to reach the monument, to fully confront his guilt, to reconcile with Bette, to escape into the video game world, even to retain his deified status as the bear-protagonist. Failure is intertwined with his attempt at 'making up a world where having killed someone you love isn't important,' implying his quest for escapism was doomed from the outset.[432] Cooper's attempt to succeed postmodernism through his integration of digital technology produces a comparable failure defined by forms of repetition. Instead of attempting to escape a trauma that is repeated within this video game platform, Cooper attempts to digitally succeed postmodernism. Yet, like Jim, Cooper's digital landscape provides both a stage and a metaphor for his failures. By repeating a postmodern mourning thematically that memorialises an absence of radical transformation, the novel becomes allegorical of his counter-intuitive repetition of postmodernism, exemplifying his failure to surpass it. This failure emphasises the limits of Jim's autonomy within environments he cannot escape nor transform, which Cooper also shares. The central distinction between them is that while Jim directly articulates his failure to confront his trauma, Cooper at best indirectly addresses this inability to surpass postmodernism. Rather than simply being a conventional recounting of grief that fails to produce innovative experimentation, *God Jr.* also fails to surpass Cooper's connection to postmodern conventions, reinforcing its derivative status. The novel's failure partly derives from Cooper's narrow definition of postmodernism as simply a style that has become passé. Instead of considering how postmodernism's cultural integration informs a relation to the world, Cooper reduces it to a stylistic convention that bears little relation to its contemporary relevance. The expansion of postmodernism beyond a purely literary style means its strategies and devices are incorporated into contemporary practices that make it difficult to surpass or reject, especially in the way Cooper attempts. This makes *God Jr.* a deeply contradictory work made interesting primarily for its failures.

[431] Ibid., p. 162.
[432] Ibid., p. 160.

To Forget is to Repeat: Postmodernism & the Future in *Zac's Control Panel*

In *Zac's Control Panel*, Cooper repeats his connection to postmodernism through GIFs rather than video games. As in his other GIF-focused works, these GIFs dramatise the absence of prose through moving images largely taken from TV, film, and music videos. Yet, despite the appearance of innovation through digital technology, the works repeat the conventions of postmodernism. Cooper's use of GIFs exemplify his counter-intuitive repetition of postmodernism through his attempt to look beyond it, where a narrow definition of what he attempts to surpass results in its repetition in the present. Gilles Lipovetsky defines hypermodernism as 'a headlong rush forwards,' distinguished from postmodernism in its use of digital technology to accelerate into the future, rather than remaining fixated upon an apparently exhausted past.[433] Comparably, Cooper's GIFs produce an oversaturation of repetitions that pay no attention to any context other than the present, replacing *God Jr.*'s concerns with unresolved repetitions that remain tied to the past. Yet, in doing so, both Lipovetsky and Cooper overstate this transformation.

Lipovetsky claims hypermodernism 'is revolutionary in the technical and scientific domain, but no longer so in culture.'[434] This necessarily aligns Coover's hypertextuality – a theory produced in the early nineties by a canonical postmodern novelist – with hypermodernism rather than postmodernism. Similarly, Cooper's use of GIFs presents Jean Baudrillard's hyperreal – a repetitive 'real without origin or reality' that produces an 'implosion of meaning' – as solely contemporary, rather than also postmodern.[435] Even Cooper's use of GIFs, a dated file format revived within contemporary digital culture, relies upon a relation to the past that is lost in this singular focus upon the future.[436] Although Lipovetsky describes hypermodernism as a 'new society,' it is one that 'ceaselessly exhumes and 'rediscovers' the past,' accelerating postmodern pastiche while ignoring this repetition in its production of the new.[437] *Zac's Control Panel* remains integrally connected to postmodernism in ways that make the work appear regressive,

[433] Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*, pp. 30-31.
[434] Ibid., p. 62.
[435] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 1, 31.
[436] Kate M. Miltner and Tim Highfield, 'Never Gonna GIF You Up: Analyzing the Cultural Significance of the Animated GIF', *Social Media + Society*, 3 (3) (2017), 1-11 (p. 2).
[437] Lipovetsy, *Hypermodern Times*, pp. 33, 57.

counter-intuitively repeating a postmodernism Cooper claims has been exhausted. The appearance of innovation, which ultimately masks the work's conservative use of postmodernism, foregrounds the significance of this postmodern continuum through the looped images Cooper draws upon.

Technically, GIFs are a file format that loop soundless and visually limited moving images, extending the connection between *Zac's Control Panel* and repetition. These clips of various visual media can be extracted, repeated and used in new contexts to generate alternative meanings because of their self-contained form of expression. Graig Uhlin cites this repetitive looping as a feature integral to the GIF's popularity, where a GIF's 'repetition indicates that a viewer is not guided along by a narrative structuring of time. The viewer is rather caught up in the GIF's temporal suspension: to view it is to be captivated.'[438] The resurgence of GIFs in contemporary culture, arguably succeeded by memes, emphasises a postmodern appropriation central to their resurgence, as well as Cooper's construction of his works that utilise them. Like memes, GIFs draw upon a dated file format that is recycled to make it contemporarily relevant, but utilise looped moving images rather than still ones. Although, by comparison, memes have outlived GIFs, which reinforces this disruption of linear progression integral to *Zac's Control Panel* on a number of levels – from the cultural function(s) of GIFs to Cooper's repetition of postmodernism.

GIFs embody what Jussi Parikka calls media archaeology where waste – what he calls 'the residue of media culture' – can be 'transported, recycled, ripped apart, abandoned, resold and reused,' challenging their obsolete status and coherent linear progression.[439] This recycling of waste produces a form of reuse comparable to the one depicted in *Sadie: the Sadist*. However, this is without the subversive revitalisation of postmodern tropes that are reconsidered within a distinct historical moment and set of discrete cultural practices and concerns. Here, the reuse of waste Parikka describes echoes the fragmented and non-linear depiction of the past through bricolage and pastiche in *Zac's Control Panel*. In Cooper's work, GIFs both depict and are part of a chronological dislocation that counter-intuitively repeats the tropes of postmodernism.

[438] Graig Uhlin, 'Playing in the Gif(t) Economy,' *Games and Culture*, 9 (6) (2014), 517-527 (p. 520).
[439] Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?* (Cambridge & Malden: Polity, 2012), p. 166.

The process of reuse is also central to conceptual writing, specifically the inspiration informing it. However, in Cooper's works it is dramatised in ways that reinforce his connection to American literary postmodernism. This is particularly evident in the work's attempts to foreground the processes of reading and writing through its fragmented, cyclical and metafictional techniques. If *God Jr.* disrupts linear progression through repetitions of postmodernism through depictions of digital technology, *Zac's Control Panel* extends this process. Where the former focused upon failed attempts to forget through video game escapism, the latter is distinguished by its ignorance of the past and its fixation upon the future through the use of GIFs.

Zac's Control Panel appears to make grand claims about succeeding postmodernism, repeating well established theoretical approaches through GIFs that undermines Cooper's attempts at innovation. The work repeats the incomplete, fragmented and open-ended nature of postmodernism described by Lyotard through Cooper's reliance upon digital technology. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), Lyotard claims that new technologies make information 'even more mobile and subject to piracy.'[440] This is repeated by Cooper's use of pastiche, where the relocation and recombination of GIFs aims to produce new effects, but simply repeats this established convention digitally. The reuse of images and the repetitive form they take as GIFs presents a superficial newness that cannot distinguish itself from a postmodernism Cooper seeks to succeed. These works extend the stalling represented in *God Jr.* and Cooper's earlier writing, presenting an inability to move past postmodernism. In his later book *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (1991), Lyotard claims 'Hidden in the cynicism of innovation is certainly the despair that nothing further will happen,' providing a further connection to *Zac's Control Panel*.[441] Cooper's GIF-focused works suggest an innovation that they are unable to achieve, making this cynical fear of stagnation an implied feature of the work's use of repetition.

Cooper's use of GIFs is also comparable to Claude Lévi-Strauss' description of bricolage outlined in *The Savage Mind* (1962), providing an additional link to canonical

[440] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 6.
[441] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (UK & USA: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 106-107.

rather than innovative theoretical positions. For Lévi-Strauss, 'The intermittent fashion for 'collages', originating when craftsmanship was dying, could not for its part be anything but the transposition of 'bricolage' into the realms of contemplation.'[442] If, as Lévi-Strauss claims, 'The first aspect of bricolage is thus to construct a system of paradigms with the fragments of syntagmatic chains,' *Zac's Control Panel* reflects this.[443] Cooper attempts to construct a new digital paradigm to distinguish his GIF-based works from postmodernism. Yet, his use of fragmentation and appropriation as central features of these works explicitly connects them to twentieth century art practices. This inability to escape this art-practice history, which Cooper repeats, connects these works to postmodernism via their absence of radical transformation as much as through their aesthetic similarities. Cooper's use of juxtaposition and appropriation only superficially feign innovation, relying upon an ignorance of these established methodologies to uphold this appeal to a digital avant-garde.

Instead of separating his work from postmodernism, *Zac's Control Panel* is distinguished from common cultural uses of GIFs. However, rather than this being an innovation of GIFs, Cooper simply repeats the conventions of postmodernism, situating GIFs within older aesthetic forms that make his process of recycling appear regressive. When describing his blog, Cooper cites its 'very limited form' as a source of creative potential that 'can be almost anything.'[444] The inspiration he draws from the technological simplicity of this blogging template infers a connection to his use of GIFs, which comparably rely upon old and simple features of digital technology. Yet, the value Cooper finds in limitation in no way diminishes his apparently limited grasp of digital mediums, making his expression through them appear problematic and regressive rather than innovative and experimental. By simply copying and pasting GIFs into a sequence, *Zac's Control Panel* illustrates Cooper's limited technological engagement within these GIF-based works. GIFs become a way of masking his repetition of older methodologies, such as bricolage and postmodernism, emphasising their continuation within contemporary art practice, while innovating neither these practices, nor the

[442] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. by George Weidenfield (Hertfordshire: The Garden City Press, 1962), p. 30.
[443] Ibid., p. 150.
[444] Kennedy, 'It's the shift that creates', p. 199.

contemporary use of GIFs. Instead of succeeding postmodernism, Cooper repeats it within *Zac's Control Panel*, specifically through forms of appropriation and pastiche, culminating in an apparently counter-intuitive exemplar of the limits of radical transformation. Pastiche and bricolage are repackaged, but fundamentally remain unchanged beneath the superficial glaze of digital technology. Repetition in *Zac's Control Panel* appears through the looped and appropriated imagery of the GIFs, but also through Cooper's counter-intuitive repetition of postmodernism through his adopted approaches. Therefore, despite the guise of experimentation, *Zac's Control Panel* digitally repeats rather than innovates these approaches that either describe or partly inform postmodernism.

The conventions of GIFs and their interpretation make them an odd justification of a succession from postmodernism. Kate Miltner and Tim Highfield claim 'GIFs allow users to demonstrate a layering of understanding, a Russian doll of cultural meaning reflecting a hierarchy of knowledge,' connecting GIFs to a quintessentially postmodern metaethical aesthetic strategy.[445] *Zac's Control Panel* relies upon a comparable layering of meaning through Cooper's use of GIFs, connected also to Roland Barthes' theory of the Death of the Author, but with one notable difference.[446] Instead of drawing upon the cultural significance of the images used, Cooper's work produces a layering of meaning within the work based purely on the surface aesthetics of the images and disorientating sensations they evoke in the viewer. This plurality of meaning, distinguished from authorial intent, provides GIFs with a flexibility and applicability that within *Zac's Control Panel* gestures towards postmodern metafictional techniques of narrative interpretation. Either in isolation or collectively, Cooper's sequenced GIFs are unable to produce a coherent sense of character or plot development, dramatising the limits of language pictorially. Meaning is generated through the sequencing of GIFs, and the story the audience constructs through them, rather than a reliance upon a specialised knowledge derived from the mediums they are drawn from. Layered meaning is combined with a superficial repetition of looped images without pre-existing context through digital

[445] Miltner and Highfield, 'Never Gunna GIF You Up', p. 7.
[446] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142-148, (p. 147).

technology, combining Barthes' Death of the Author with Baudrillard's hyperreality through Coover's hypertext. In this respect, it becomes difficult to view *Zac's Control Panel* as anything but inherently postmodern. Although *Zac's Control Panel* produces meaning through visual pastiche, contrasting the isolated function of GIFs as stand-alone images, this repeats a postmodernism Cooper rejects rather than innovating his use of GIFs.

Zac's Control Panel prioritises sequencing over fixed meaning, even blending image and text in a way that subverts conventional GIF use simply to repeat the established conventions of comic books. This is clearest in chapter 1, particularly the opening section, where a significant number of the GIFs are accompanied by text. It establishes the parameters of the work by articulating a combination of pain, entrapment, exhaustion and reflections upon death. This is exemplified by the opening GIF of a woman, laid on the floor covered in blood, accompanied by the looped phrase, 'I've said it a thousand fucking times that I'm okay that I'm fine it's all just in my mind.'

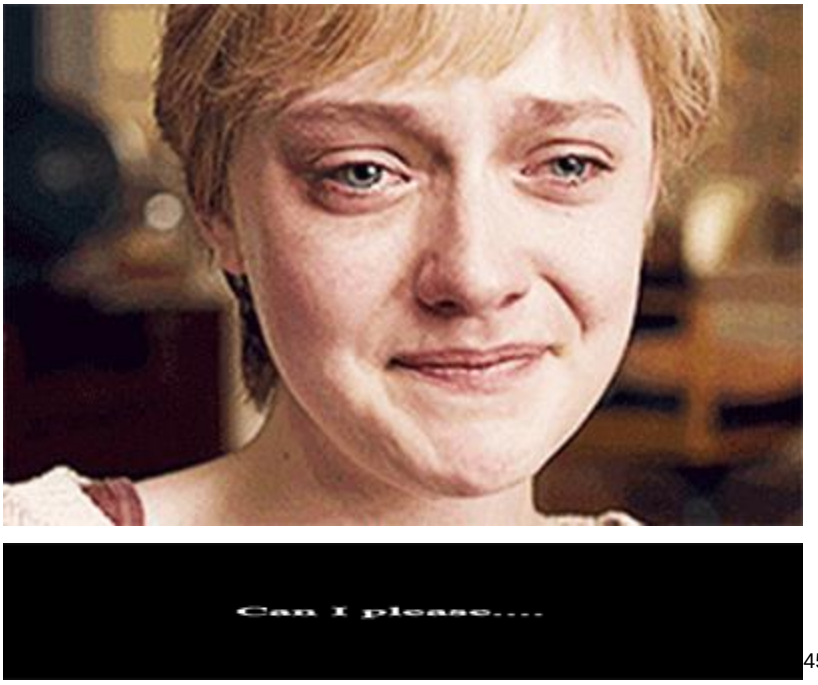
 [447]

This relocation of suffering from a physical to a mental state informs the subsequent representations of violence. It positions the reflection upon violence in this chapter and the rest of the work as fantastical, imaginative and transformative, rather than literal examples of visceral mutilation. This process reworks Kate Miltner and Tim Highfield's description of GIFs, shifting the focus from isolated symbolic inference to a sustained attempt at narrative construction. They suggest the 'self-contained narrative, separate to the longer sequence from which the loop is sourced' is an integral function of GIFs, which contrasts the extended sequences Cooper constructs through these fragments.[448] The included text alters the assumptions the audience makes about the images, providing some direction in an otherwise abstract narrative, foregrounding the significance of sequencing in this work. However, while this might alter the inference of the images, it is unable to fundamentally transform Cooper's continued reliance upon postmodernism and other established theoretical strategies that undermine his appeal to experimentalism.

Later in this opening sequence, this is reinforced by the text accompanying another image of a face, stating 'Reality is a prison.' The recurring use of faces in this opening section compounds the emphasis placed upon the internal reflective use of violence, reinforced by the use of accompanying text, removing external references to environmental context in favour of the personal. Anne Burns suggests selfies have been

[447] Figure 1. Dennis Cooper, *Zac's Control Panel* (N.P.: Kiddiepunk, 2015) <http://www.kiddiepunk.com/zacscontrolpanel/1.html> [accessed 21st September 2020].
[448] Miltner and Highfield, 'Never Gonna GIF You Up', p. 6.

established as ‘connoting narcissism and vanity,’ emphasising the self-interest evoked by the close up images of faces in Cooper’s GIFs. [449] The GIFs Cooper includes are not technically selfies, since they are not taken by the person in shot. Nevertheless, they evoke a comparable subjective focus to Burns’ reflection upon public perceptions of selfies. Their emphasis upon subjectivity rather than exteriority locates the sequence’s representations of violence within an imagined space that here infers introspective reflections upon death. Furthermore, when these negative connotations associated with selfies infer a connection to punishment, this implied threat reinforces the violence made explicit in *Zac’s Control Panel*. This internalised punishment for reflecting upon beauty is reinforced by the brief use of text accompanying the GIFs, such as ‘Can I please…just stop existing…,’ where youth and violence are intertwined, supplementing this established focus upon an internally imaged world.



[450]

[449] Anne Burns, ‘Self(ie)-Discipline: Social Regulations as Enacted Through the Discussion of Photographic Practice’, *International Journal of Communications*, 9 (2015), 1716-1733 (p. 1720).
[450] Figure 2. Dennis Cooper, *Zac’s Control Panel* (N.P.: Kiddiepunk, 2015) <http://www.kiddiepunk.com/zacscontrolpanel/1.html> [accessed 21st September 2020].

Yet, Cooper's divergence from Burns' description of selfies reinforces his connection to more dated aspects of postmodernism. In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980), Barthes connects the image to the photographer, stating 'I am doomed by (well-meaning) Photography always to have an expression.'[451] This attachment echoes Cooper's use of these portrait-based GIFs, where signification is central to their inclusion in *Zac's Control Panel*. It is distinct from selfies, which are commonly seen as secondarily signifying narcissism, where the primary role of these GIFs is to mobilise an as yet undefined signification. The 'micro-version of death' Barthes aligns with this shift from subject to object evokes a violence that is also central to these GIFs, and which further distinguishes them from selfies.[452] If selfies represent the repeated capturing of subjectivity by the object of the image, they are not defined primarily by the violence Barthes aligns with them, or which Cooper evokes alongside them.

Burns describes selfies as integrally linked to the construction, criticism and policing of subjectivity. Where Barthes presents a violence of de-subjectification, and Cooper infers an as yet unconstructed signification, Burns argues selfies remain more explicitly connected to subjectivity. The criticism and devaluation of selfies Burns aligns with a cultural misogyny denotes 'a sublimated form of control over the behavior of others.'[453] Burns' interrogation of this criticism considers attempts to diminish the value of the selfie-taking subject, implying a connection to the death Barthes and Cooper incorporate. Yet, this cultural policing of subjectivity represents systemic forms of microaggressions that infer rather than explicitly evoke violence. This differing relation to violence, particularly death, distinguishes Burns' description of selfies from Barthes' reflection upon photography and Cooper's use of GIFs. *Zac's Control Panel* retains a more direct relation to subjectivity than Barthes, via the selfie-like portrait GIFs, but uses this more contemporary digital template to repeat rather than innovate established art-based practices. By prioritising a subjectivity connected to the recurring images of violence and beauty, Cooper's sequenced GIFs establishes a theme that runs throughout the work, connecting them more directly to pre-digital theories of

[451] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999), p. 12.
[452] Ibid., p. 14.
[453] Burns, 'Self(ie)-Discipline', p. 1727.

photography than digital representations of selfies. The difficulties of conveying plot through sequenced GIFs presents the use of text as a form of scaffolding comparable to the combination of words and images in comic books. Although *Zac's Control Panel* is distinguished by its sustained level of abstraction, its periodic integration of text provides the audience with a context that supports the sequencing of moving images. The inclusion of words supplements the GIFs, adding a rare form of signposting that connects Cooper's use of GIFs to comic books, distinguishing this work from the conventional use of GIFs in digital culture.

Cooper's connection to comic book theory provides a further example of his repetition of established tropes rather than innovative approaches in *Zac's Control Panel*. In *Understanding Comic Books: The Invisible Art* (1994), Scott McCloud describes writing as '*perceived* information,' contrasting the '*received* information' of pictures, where 'the message is *instantaneous*.'[454] For McCloud, 'It takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language,' distinguishing it from the immediacy of pictorial imagery.[455] Yet, like Cooper's use of GIFs, this does not guarantee that images are free from abstraction. As McCloud suggests, 'When pictures are more abstracted from "reality," they require greater levels of *perception, more like words*.'[456] Comparably, Cooper's use of GIFs relies upon their abstraction, but one that also partly resists specialist knowledge, or previous function and context to decode them. In *Zac's Control Panel*, GIFs become a form of language used to convey the narrative, where the audience draws upon intuition rather than specialised knowledge to interpret them. The audience's more conscious interpretation of the work, as the continuity and precision offered by prose is stripped back, gives *Zac's Control Panel* a metafictional quality that reinforces this connection to postmodernism. Cooper's sequencing of images further the viewer's awareness of this metafictional process of narrative construction and interpretation, intensifying rather than undermining the connection to postmodernism through his use of comic book tropes.

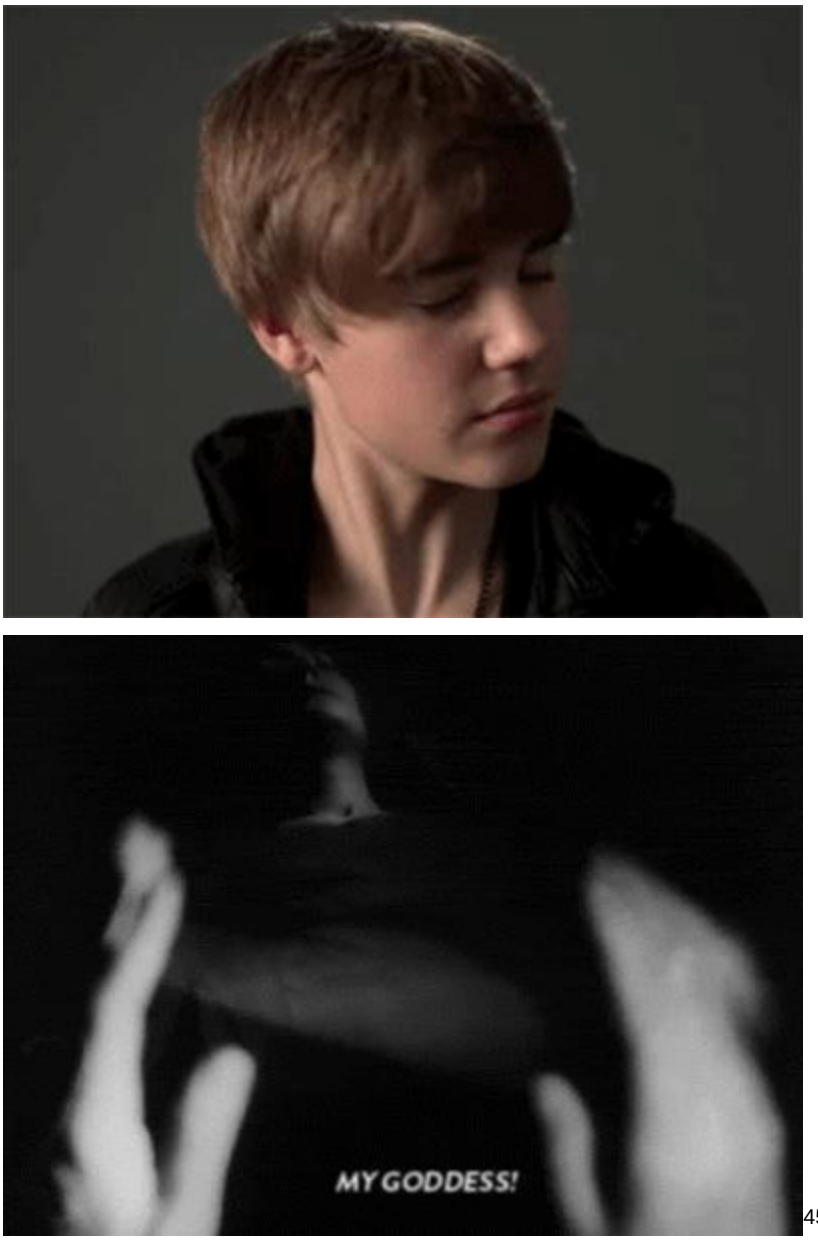
[454] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 49.
[455] Ibid.
[456] Ibid.

Lev Kuleshov's theory of cinematic editing illustrates how Cooper's attempt to write cinematically repeats rather than innovates old techniques. Lev Kuleshov presents cinematic editing as central to meaning creation, rather than only the content of the shots, arguing: 'The content of a shot in itself is not so important as is the joining of two shots of different content and the method of their connection and their alternation.'[457] This has since been replicated in controlled conditions and become an established cinematic theory known as the Kuleshov effect.[458] This is central to Cooper's combination of GIFs, which mobilises context in a slightly different way to their more common singular use. In isolation, their interpretation is reliant upon the linguistic dialogue they are situated within, producing multiple potential meanings dependent upon this contextual deployment. Cooper replaces this more explicit contextual awareness, which enables the decoding of a GIF, with a sequence of GIFs, partly abstracting this circumstantially created meaning. However, this abstraction that alters their contemporary cultural use arises from Cooper's connection to Kuleshov, giving his use of GIFs a regressive quality. *Zac's Control Panel* gestures towards the production of contextual meaning by making the audience aware of the significance of sequencing in the processes of meaning construction, but by no means in a way that makes this work innovative.

At its best, this technique is used to advance the metafictional features of the work, repeating a connection to postmodernism Cooper seemingly rejects. The sequences of GIFs provide repeated variants of related themes, combining the looped repetitiveness of individual images to produce forms of passé repetition masquerading as experimentalism. In the second part of the first chapter, Cooper extends the connection between violence and beauty established in the opening section. This is achieved through a sequence combining the aesthetic beauty of male youth with hyper-violence, making this sequence an altered repetition of the first section of the chapter.

[457] Lev Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film: Writings of Lev Kuleshov*, ed. by Ronald Levaco, trans. by Ronald Levaco (Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 46-47.
[458] Daniel Barratt and others, 'Does the Kuleshov Effect Really Exist? Revisiting a Classic Film Experiment on Facial Expressions and Emotional Contexts', *Perception*, 45 (8) (2016), 847-874 (pp. 848, 865).

The work establishes this focus through a GIF coupling of Justin Bieber with a blurred image of hands, accompanied by the caption ‘MY GODDESS.’

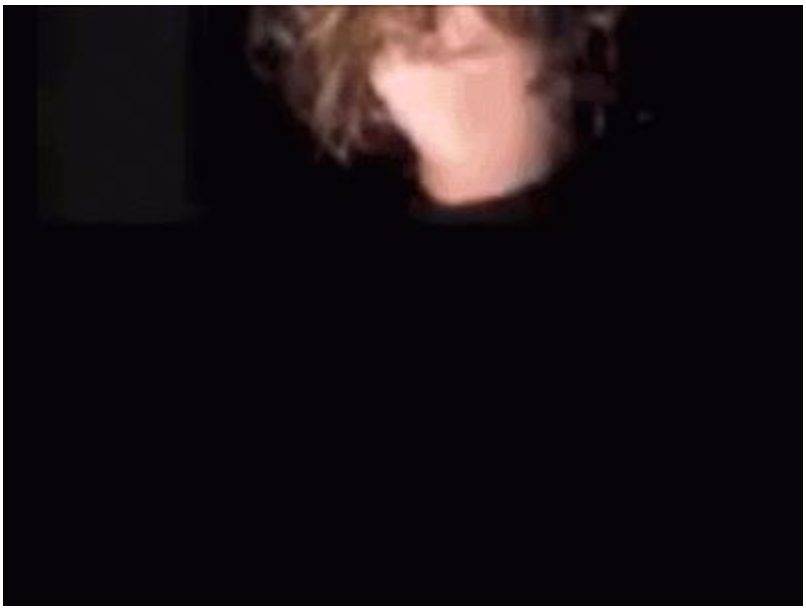


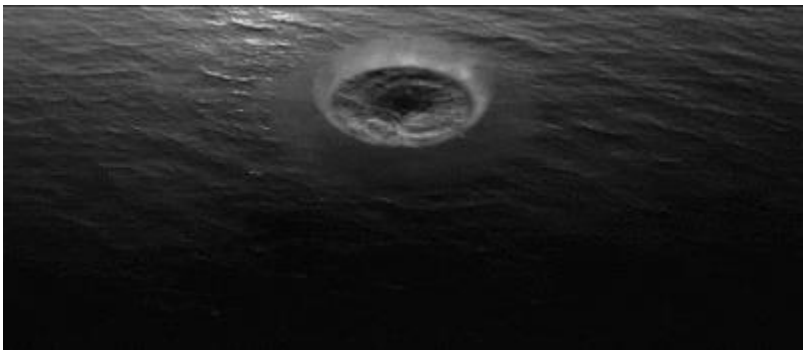
[459]

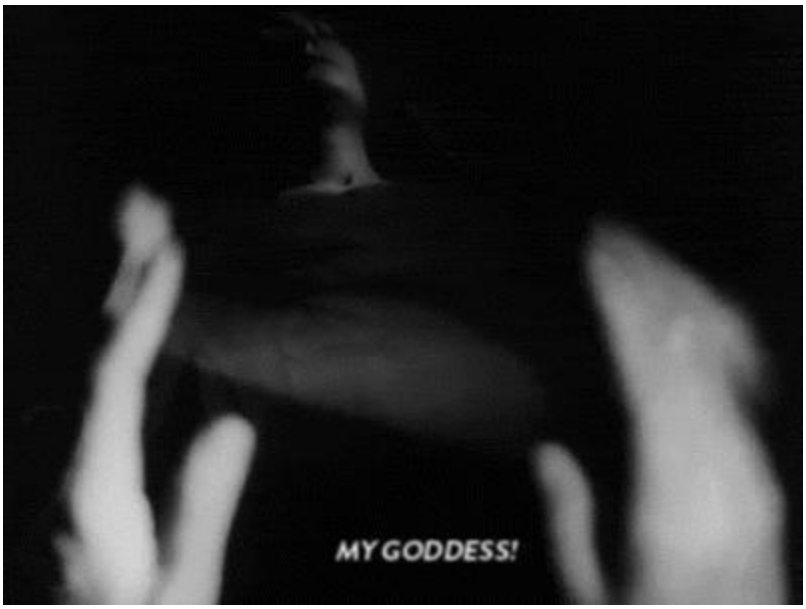
This celebratory tone transforms the isolated loop of Bieber shaking his hair out of his eyes, associating his image with religious symbolism. The coupling of these GIFs

[459] Figure 3. Dennis Cooper, *Zac’s Control Panel* (N.P.: Kiddiepunk, 2015) <http://www.kiddiepunk.com/zacscontrolpanel/1.html> [accessed 21st September 2020].

deifies and memorialises Bieber's youth through a connection to religious worship – a meaning produced when the GIFs are viewed in series. As a stand-alone pair, this sequence depicts a valorisation of the pubescent male form, which resonates with much of Cooper's writing. Within the chapter more broadly, this sequence follows a series of violent and emotional visuals combining blood and tears, extending the religious symbolism through an inferred connection to pain and sacrifice. This visual entwinement of violence and religious sacrifice is reinforced by the GIF couples that come immediately before and after this sequence. A head falling followed by a shock wave in water establishes a movement that is succeeded by the deified representation of male beauty, while GIFs of a severed head and quickly aging hands immediately follow.






MY GODDESS!

460

The escalating images of violence, punctuated by this image of religious beauty, combines the fantastical and the religious – blending childish, cartoon images of evil transformation with extreme religious sacrifice, such as the beheading of John the Baptist. It establishes the centrality of purification and transformation through extremity, which is extended by the wildness of nature in chapter 2, and the connection between music and angst in chapter 3. Cooper's reliance upon sequencing therefore functions on a number of levels within *Zac's Control Panel*: through the short sequences, their location within each chapter, and the organisation of the chapters collectively. Although

460 Figure 4. Dennis Cooper, *Zac's Control Panel* (N.P.: Kiddiepunk, 2015) <http://www.kiddiepunk.com/zacscontrolpanel/1.html> [accessed 21st September 2020].

these sequences of GIFs seem experimental, they are only superficially so, providing little more than a way of dramatising metafictional techniques that make manifest a connection to the concerns and techniques of postmodernism.

The reliance upon otherwise unconnected looped images integrates a layer of abstraction that foregrounds the need for interpretation, making these metafictional devices explicit. Camelia Gradinaru aligns GIFs with communication that extends beyond the limits of prose, connecting them to Cooper's longstanding interest in the limits of language. She states, 'we can talk about multiple modes of communication, language not being the main mode anymore because it cannot decode the entire meaning of a multimodal message.'[461] This attempt to communicate outside of language extends Cooper's recurring depictions of the limits of language in his writing – from Dennis' inability to adequately describe his violent fantasies in *Frisk*, to Jim's unwillingness to confront his responsibility for Tommy's death in *God Jr*. By exploring this through GIFs rather than prose, *Zac's Control Panel* dramatises the inadequacies of language pictorially, where GIFs centralise this ambiguity in a way that makes it difficult to ignore. Essentially, Cooper repeats Barthes' claim that 'Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile.'[462] The absence of a coherent narrative both obscures and produces plot and character development, encouraging the audience to construct their own interpretation by forcing them to confront the ambiguities of writing pictorially. It is not that Cooper's role as author is removed. Instead, as Barthes suggests, Cooper's use of GIFs dramatise the limits of authorial intention through their repetition of established postmodern techniques, and in their use of ready-made images and text.

Appropriation stages the metafictional concerns of *Zac's Control Panel*, reinforcing a counter-intuitive repetition of postmodernism. The sequenced images that replace prose are appropriated content, combined to present Cooper's appropriation of both digital mediums and longstanding theoretical techniques. This multi-layering of appropriation intensifies but does not innovate its connection to postmodernism,

[461] Camelia Gradinaru, 'GIFs as Floating Signifiers', *Sign Systems Studies*, 46 (2-3) (2018), 294-318 (p. 297).
[462] Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 147.

repeating this pastiche style in a way that compliments the looping of the images that stage this replication. Pastiche-based recycling emphasises a repetition that explicitly draws from the past without requiring an awareness of any context beyond their sequencing. *Zac's Control Panel* partly dislocates linear progression through its fragmentary, bricolage style of pastiche construction. It disrupts the passage of time through the looped images of the GIFs, but also through Cooper's repetition of postmodernism, making the work equivalent to a GIF in its pseudo-innovation of digital technology.

The GIFs in *Zac's Control Panel* extend this non-linearity, suggesting a connection to the contemporary and the past simultaneously. In Chapter 2 of *Zac's Control Panel*, this is achieved through the sequenced GIFs, which visually jump between a disparate array of images that are brought together through their organisation. Like other chapters, it frequently jumbles past and present timelines that disrupts linear progression. This is apparent through the series of GIFs, anomalous in that they are all taken from the same source material, which show a girl climbing a tree. By beginning with the girl reaching the top of the tree, watching her climb as the viewer descends down the tree and the page, a disorientating movement of time is produced.

 [463]

If this scene is read as a flashback, it provides an opportunity to review the past from the present moment. While the scene relies upon the reader moving through the sequence in order to produce this effect, repetition is produced both by the individual repetition of the clips within each GIF, and also through the flashback they collectively infer. It produces a cyclical loop that repeats the past as a memory that inspires and remains central to the present. The two moments are intertwined by this process of remembering or repeating, disrupting chronology through a repetition that continually returns to this event from the present, echoing Cooper's counter-intuitive relation to postmodernism.

Repetition is not only time-based but also appears spatially in the work, inferring a dislocated repetition of the history of American writing through digitised form. This climbing GIF sequence is located within a chapter that repeatedly depicts forms of movement connected to both humans (climbing, falling, jumping, spinning) and nature (wind, rain, lightning, animals, panning clouds). The unnamed female character at the centre of this chapter repeatedly confronts and is confronted by nature, presenting a battle for dominance within her environment in which she seeks to assert her autonomy within a hostile landscape. This battle against nature evokes the American frontier

[463] Figure 5. Dennis Cooper, *Zac's Control Panel* (N.P.: Kiddiepunk, 2015) <http://www.kiddiepunk.com/zacscontrolpanel/2.html> [accessed 21st September 2020].

narratives, where confronting nature defined the development of the contemporary American consciousness, particularly notions of independence and liberty. Like Larzer Ziff's claim that 'America was made to fit literature before literature was made to fit America,' Cooper seeks a freedom to set his own parameters through digitised form, echoing the freedoms aligned with earlier American prose.[464] Cooper gestures towards this freedom through images of wind that infer an openness that is both circular and linear in movement, extending the motif found in the flashback sequence. Wind comes to represent the competing movements of time that inform cultural shifts and the process of artistic creative freedom. It symbolises a repetition that provides an inspiration, which necessarily retains a connection to a linear passing of time, even if this chronology does not produce progression.

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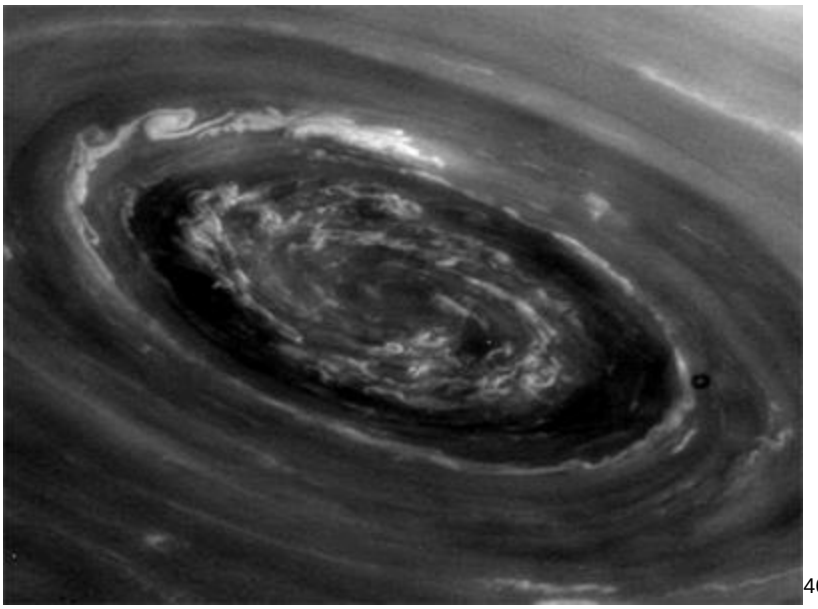
[464] Larzer Ziff, *Literary Democracy: The Declaration of Cultural Independence in America* (Middlesex & New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. ix.
[465] Figure 6. Dennis Cooper, ***Zac's Control Panel*** (N.P.: Kiddiepunk, 2015) <http://www.kiddiepunk.com/zacscontrolpanel/2.html> [accessed 21st September 2020].

 [466]

Wind connects *Zac's Control Panel* to culturally ingrained aspects of American identity, represented through a digital medium that also represents a contemporary environment against which personal autonomy is positioned. The fluid and non-physical features of digital culture, specifically the internet, provide opportunities for things to be edited or removed without warning. This presents a comparably vast, neutral and potentially hostile environment to the freedom of nature depicted in the chapter. However, the grand gestures towards freedom, progress and independence evoked are not attained in practice by *Zac's Control Panel*. Instead, the work emphasises a failure to innovate beyond Cooper's repetition of established approaches replicated through a digitised pictorial medium. Like the girl in *Zac's Control Panel* who is confronted by an unfathomably large, amorphous force of nature within which she must assert herself, Cooper infers his harnessing of digital technology's potential provides a clear succession from postmodernism. What is presented as a wild and untapped resource, comparable to the Western Frontier for early American settlers, produces no comparable construction of a new entity for Cooper. This overstated hope for creation beyond the influence of postmodernism is oddly attempted through the repetition of an array of tropes common to artistic creation (appropriation), earlier movements (the

[466] Figure 7. Dennis Cooper, *Zac's Control Panel* (N.P.: Kiddiepunk, 2015) <http://www.kiddiepunk.com/zacscontrolpanel/2.html> [accessed 21st September 2020].

structuralism of sequencing, or modernism's search for autonomy), or derivative of postmodernism. This problematic repetition of postmodernism within a work positioned against it is precisely what makes *Zac's Control Panel* interesting, though not for the innovation Cooper seemingly seeks.

Like Baudrillard's digitised repetition of hyperreality, *Zac's Control Panel* produces a dislocated repetition that undermines the possibility of radical transformation. The absence of origin or reality of the hyperreal is echoed by Cooper's use of GIFs, which are sequenced to illicit a response from the audience without defining the specifics of what this might be. In *Zac's Control Panel*, this does not necessarily negate the possibility of a viewer drawing upon a contextual awareness of the images to produce a reading. However, this is not a requirement to be able to engage with the work. Baudrillard describes hyperreality as a process where 'all depth and energy of representation have vanished in a hallucinatory resemblance.'[467] *Zac's Control Panel* repeats this process in its de-prioritisation of context-led meaning construction, driven by extreme limits placed upon coherence, communication and meaning. Cooper's oversaturation of information inhibits the ability to convey meaning, and for the audience to have a contextual awareness of such a wide array of source material. This makes *Zac's Control Panel* comparable to Baudrillard's claim that 'information dissolves meaning.'[468] Cooper's use of de-contextualised GIFs presents digital abstraction as a form of experimental innovation, but instead produces a feedback loop that repeats Baudrillardian postmodernism through an overstimulation of looped information.

The superfluousness of contextual awareness is made apparent in chapter 3, which simulates the experience of a live performance, depicted through the combination of sound, violence, sexuality, and suspense. The cyclical movement of the images embodies the jostling crowd through the repeated images of sound waves, instruments and vocalists, accentuated by their looped format.

[467] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 23.
[468] Ibid., p. 81.

 [469]

Yet, this sensation is produced as an effect of this chaotic movement, rather than necessarily conveyed through a carefully selected sequence of GIFs. Vibrations of

[469] Figure 8. Dennis Cooper, *Zac's Control Panel* (N.P.: Kiddiepunk, 2015) <http://www.kiddiepunk.com/zacscontrolpanel/3.html> [accessed 21st September 2020].

unheard sounds are repeatedly depicted, staging a series of instances where information is conveyed but without communicating content, making these allegorical of hyperreality. It echoes what Baudrillard calls a repetition that 'Rather than creating communication, *it exhausts itself in the act of staging communication.*'[470] This exhaustion is central to Cooper's use of bricolage, connected to craftsmanship, combining these two forms of exhaustion in a fragmented sequence of visual loops that foreground an epochal, intellectual and artistic relation to limitation.

Alongside the simulation of a live experience, the chapter also gestures towards grander symbolic purification that this perpetual repetition problematises. While this evokes Cooper's desire to digitally surpass postmodernism, this is combined with A Baudrillardian cynicism towards radical transformation that undermines it. For Baudrillard, hyperreality means 'the medium and the real are now in a single nebula whose truth is indecipherable.'[471] This merging of the virtual and the physical obscures distinct, logical forms of successive chronology, producing a synthesised superficial reality where 'it is useless to dream of revolution through content.'[472] *Zac's Control Panel* disrupts the distinction between digital and physical in Cooper's shift from written prose to GIFs, reinforced by the ambiguity integral to his fragmented bricolage of semi-incongruous imagery. The stalled progression, where loops depict an absence of radical transformation, can be extracted from the work's symbolic inferences as well as the recycling and repetition the sequenced GIFs. A series depicting a revolving flame, the iconic nineties imagery of Kurt Cobain spitting into the camera, and a garden sprinkler embody this pluralistic relation to failed transformation through repetition.

[470] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 80.
[471] Ibid.
[472] Ibid., p. 83.

 [473]

The above sequence of GIFs combine anger with notions of purification through visual rotations that supplement the looping format of the GIFs. By situating hostility between fire and water, it infers a similarly elemental and transformative quality. This purifying aspect could depict a profound experience of the chapter's protagonist at the gig,

[473] Figure 9. Dennis Cooper, *Zac's Control Panel* (N.P.: Kiddiepunk, 2015) <http://www.kiddiepunk.com/zacscontrolpanel/3.html> [accessed 21st September 2020].

inferring a transformative quality of art. When considered alongside the phrase in chapter 1, ‘Music helps me escape the reality I live in,’ it connects purification to both an internal and cultural desire for transformation.

[474]

[474] Figure 10. Dennis Cooper, *Zac’s Control Panel* (N.P.: Kiddiepunk, 2015) <http://www.kiddiepunk.com/zacscontrolpanel/1.html> [accessed 21st September 2020].

The personal epiphany represents a transient transformation that stands in for more overarching forms of cultural succession. Like Cooper's attempts to revolutionise the novel's form, the allusions to purification and transformation remain unattainable, reinforcing the work's connection to the limits of progress postmodernism poses.

This counter-intuitive prioritisation of repetition over radical transformation is reinforced by the sequence's combination of purification with the image of Kurt Cobain. The iconic status of nineties rock band Nirvana, embodied by Cobain, symbolically repeats this failed transformation through its connection to American counterculture, specifically grunge. Even without specific contextual knowledge, Cobain's hair and antisocial spitting represent a countercultural youthful defiance, located within a loop that cannot progress, caught between implied symbols of purification. This notion of being caught between cycles of transformation as a self-contained loop of aggression also represents a postmodern critique of radical transformation through repetition. It reinforces an exhaustion without the necessity for an original context that Baudrillard rejects, combined with the commercialisation of countercultural defiance embodied by Nirvana. Gradinaru claims Baudrillard's hyperreal leaves little space for an audience's interpretation of GIFs because, 'when we label GIFs only as an epitome of our frenzied epoch, we also miss the plethora of meanings hidden by their usage.'[475] However, in *Zac's Control Panel*, meaning is produced in response to the limits of communication. The oversaturation of information is central to Cooper's ambiguous and playful use of GIFs, but overstates its ability to produce innovation through digital mediums that remain bound to postmodern explanations of the world. This isolated image of rebellion on loop uses repetition to depict an exhaustion of radical transformation, emphasising the counter-intuitive repetition of postmodernism in Cooper's digitised work, providing a microcosm for his failure to succeed postmodernism.

Cooper's use of GIFs repeats a counter-intuitive connection to postmodernism rather than a digital succession of it. His use of digital technology foregrounds his longstanding interest in the limits of language, echoed throughout many of his novels but exemplified in *Frisk*. This is combined with a recurring use of well-established theories and techniques connected to and pre-dating postmodernism, repeating a past

[475] Gradinaru, 'GIFs as Floating Signifiers', p. 301.

Cooper seemingly attempts to ignore. By looking towards this digital future, supposedly liberated from this connection to postmodernism, *Zac's Control Panel* at best embodies the tension within digital communication Franco Berardi describes. For Berardi: 'the less meaning the message has the faster it moves, given that production and interpretation of meaning take time, while the circulation of pure information without meaning is instantaneous.'[476] This speeding up in an attempt to move forward for Cooper is produced through a digital streamlining, transferring meaning and prose into digital images and information. Movement rather than communication is similarly central to *Zac's Control Panel*. This is reinforced by Cooper's use of GIFs instead of standard picture files like JPEGs (Joint Photographic Experts Group), where perpetual repetitive movement is foregrounded more explicitly. Information is shared in a way that marginalises meaning, replacing it with sensations that privilege an audience's construction of meaning over context. Yet, in doing so, this movement counter-intuitively reproduces a connection to postmodernism that resonates with Jim in *God Jr.*, whose attempt to escape the memory of Tommy leaves him doomed to digitally repeat it indefinitely. Subsequently, if *Zac's Control Panel* communicates anything, it is the futility of his claims to surpass a postmodernism that exceeds his narrow stylistic definition, which fails to account for its cultural integration. By claiming to surpass postmodernism without fully acknowledging its legacy, *Zac's Control Panel* embodies a complex repetition of postmodernism – where it is repeated within the very thing Cooper claims to use to surpass it.

Conclusion

God Jr. and *Zac's Control Panel*'s counter-intuitive repetition of postmodernism is their most interesting feature. Not only does Cooper fail to succeed postmodernism through digital technology, but he actually repeats its features through it. In both instances, digital technology is connected to discrete and counter-intuitive repetitions of postmodernism that challenge Cooper's perceived succession. *God Jr.* depicts Jim's

[476] Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility* (London & New York: Verso, 2019), p. 156.

attempts to digitally escape his trauma, resulting in its digital repetition in his son's video game. Ultimately, Jim's inability to confront reality contributes to his inability to progress within the game's conventional narrative. *Zac's Control Panel* comparably attempts to escape a past it subsequently repeats by prioritising a digital future, where GIFs fail to mask a recurring connection to postmodern techniques. Both works present digital technology as a form of radical transformation that oddly stands counter to their depictions of chronological progression, their connection to postmodernism, and even Cooper's earlier works, such as *Frisk*. This contradictory move is intensified when these works are considered through the plot of *God Jr.* Cooper's denial of the continued legacy of postmodernism in his work is comparable to Jim's denial of a past he is subsequently doomed to repeat digitally. The irony of this connection is intensified in *Zac's Control Panel*, providing a further failed attempt at innovation and succession that simply repeats and relocates Cooper's connection to postmodernism. If this were done intentionally, it would prove to be an insightful reflection upon Cooper's inability to escape the postmodern lens through which he views the world. However, based on his definition of postmodernism and description of the creative potential of digital technology, this unfortunately seems unlikely. His repetition of postmodernism, rather than being an intentional technique through which to evaluate the present moment, represents a failure of understanding that instead becomes the insight these works produce.

Cooper's inability to grasp how postmodernism is repeated and altered in contemporary culture is integral to his misunderstanding of postmodernism. This is also true of Bret Easton Ellis, whose most contemporarily relevant work – *American Psycho* – makes his more recent texts seem comparably dated. Sadly, Cooper does not have a comparable specific novel that epitomises the contemporary relevance of postmodernism. Instead, the insights his works produce derive from his failed attempts to produce a new creative period – either personal or epochal – combined with a failed attempt to remain significant. Ellis' provocatively simplistic pseudo-conservatism in *White* (2019) reinforces a dated view of the world, making *American Psycho*'s comparably complex critical reflection upon commodification more strikingly relevant. Similarly, Cooper's simplistic view of digital technology as providing a clear succession

from postmodernism establishes a further misunderstanding of contemporary culture by postmodern authors. Yet, where Ellis' is an inability to engage with the cultural politics of a new generation, Cooper's is a confusion produced partly by his simplification of postmodernism. Cooper reduces postmodernism to an avant-garde style of experimentation, rather than viewing it as a culturally integrated set of practices, which is integral to the value of these works, specifically their failures. His repetition of postmodernism is produced by an unattainable desire to break free of it, a form of radical transformation the preceding chapters have illustrated, largely through a connection to advanced capitalism. Cooper's failure to reinvigorate avant-garde experimentalism stems from his inability to comprehend how features of postmodernism are necessarily repeated in his attempts to escape it.

This entwinement, a complexity integrated more explicitly into the previous textual reflections upon an inescapable capitalist framework, is absent from Cooper's considerations of postmodernism. His definition of postmodernism as something to surpass because of its exhaustion must therefore be revised. Instead of exhaustion being an undesirable by-product that requires reinvigoration, repetition also draws a critical vitality from its ability to stage reflections upon limitation – a point that seems lost on Cooper, especially in *God Jr.* and *Zac's Control Panel*. These works produce reflections upon the complexity of succession, though ones that stand counter to Cooper's definitions of both postmodernism and the role of digital technology. Yet, it is their failures that paradoxically give them value. *God Jr.* and *Zac's Control Panel* are exemplars of the distinction between prescient ideas in postmodern texts, or their contemporary cultural extension, and the problematic strategies and views of authors connected to an American literary movement of postmodernism. Their derivative nature, rather than being a reason to dismiss them, is central to understanding the legacy of postmodernism. These works illustrate how digital technology is not inherently revolutionary or innovative, and that a desire for or perceived succession of a particular set of culturally integrated features does not mean this break has been successfully achieved. Cooper's counter-intuitive digitised repetition of postmodernism is fascinating for its failures, specifically the lack of self-reflexivity, that distinguish these works' form of repetition from previous examples of failure and revitalisation.

5. The Politicisation of Repetition: Nostalgia & Postmodernism in Tao Lin's *Taipei* and Alexandra Kleeman's *You Too Can Have A Body Like Mine*

Tao Lin's *Taipei* (2013) and Amanda Kleeman's *You Too Can Have A Body Like Mine* (2015) provide a politicised nostalgic repetition of postmodernism. Methodologically, this foregrounds an advanced capitalist continuum obscured by non-epochal cultural shifts. They extend the absence of radical transformation outlined systematically throughout the thesis, illustrating a distinct form of repetition that compliments the previous two chapters. The novels retain a focus upon collectives that incorporate a shift towards exteriority in American postmodern fiction. However, they also reintroduce an emphasise upon interiority to dramatise their distinct form of repetition. These novels build upon the counter-intuitive repetition of postmodernism presented by Cooper. Yet, where Cooper's works seek to digitally surpass postmodernism, Lin and Kleeman's texts produce dissonance through their unaltered repetition of postmodernism. This form of repetition draws upon canonical postmodern texts – Bret Easton Ellis' *Less Than Zero* (1985) for Lin, and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) for Kleeman – to dramatise its distinct approach. The novels repeat a postmodern hopelessness through a jarring repetition that refuses to update their insights for a contemporary context, producing their distinction between change and transformation. This dramatisation of repetition is integral to the novels' use of postmodernism, counterbalancing Cooper's overstated digital succession from postmodernism. These novels also present digital culture as a means of obscuring the continued relevance of postmodernism. Yet, where Cooper counter-intuitively repeated postmodernism through an overstated digital transformation of culture, Lin and Kleeman dramatise an unchanged repetition of postmodernism. Paradoxically, this repetition of the same produces postmodernism's contemporary relevance. By foregrounding a continuum of advanced capitalism, stretching from its early global expansion in the eighties to the present, the texts reduce change that is not fundamentally transformative to the superficial.

Lin and Kleeman's novels depict hopelessness as symptomatic of the texts' disillusionment with advanced capitalism. Consumption is central to their problematic attempts to resist, detach from, or succeed capitalism, intensifying the novels' hopelessness. Digital technology and hedonism are central to *Taipei*'s character's escapism, much like Cooper's, as Lin's characters attempt to evade their absent futures through consumption, but perpetuate the systemic features they seek to detach from. The novel's references to Ellis – including attending book readings, as a public figure, and his novels – allude to Lin's repetition of Ellis, particularly *Less Than Zero*'s combination of consumerism and apathy. Consumption is similarly integral to *You Too*, where food provides a metaphor that embodies the contradictory failures of subversion and escapism, comparable to Sachs' depiction of food, consumption, and subversive reuse. Yet, in Kleeman's novel this is represented via the entwinement of outsider cults and corporate supermarkets, making the pragmatism of Sadie more hopeless through the inability to forget this deadlock in *You Too*. Kleeman's text repeats *Fight Club*'s themes of consumption and collective failure through a similarly unreliable narrator and their pseudo-doppelgängers. Both novels reductively map their postmodern influences onto contemporary culture, ignoring how digital technology alters them, or ignoring digital culture altogether.

Rather than unpacking the contemporary cultural distinctions, or even exaggerating these concerns, the novels produce a distinct form of repetition that foregrounds postmodern déjà vu. Their inability to imagine superseding advanced capitalism is dramatised by their repetition of postmodernism, foregrounding an absence of radical transformation. This inability to forget or succeed perpetuates the texts' cyclical hopelessness – either providing a source of momentary escape and perpetual misery in *Taipei*, or an inability to forget as the cause of misery in *You Too*. Hopelessness reflects complex contemporary problems linked to the awkward succession from postmodernism, combined with the perpetual dominance of advanced capitalism. The novels' connection to postmodernism is multifaceted. They present a necessarily internal challenge to the limits of unsurpassable power structures through a cynicism towards radical transformation. Yet, they also intensify the awkwardness and

failure of transformative succession through their dramatised repetitions of postmodernism that produce the novels' cyclical hopelessness.

I argue that the novels' seeming nostalgia for postmodernism produces a critical function, dramatising repetition to foreground the distinction between change and transformation. Unachievable transformation in the texts' depiction of cyclical hopelessness is integral to the unchanged repetitions rather than succession of postmodernism. After analysing *Taipei*'s depictions of hedonistic and digital escapism as examples of the characters' anxiety, repeating their cyclical hopelessness through forgetting, this disillusionment is mapped onto *Less Than Zero*. Lin's comparable use of musical references is presented as an exemplar of the novel's repetition of postmodernism, particularly through Lin's nineties music references that infer countercultural commodification. *You Too*'s merging of resistance and capitalist excess within consumption metaphors is then considered, specifically how the contradictory forms of rebellion produce a cyclical hopelessness the characters cannot forget. Kleeman's novel is connected to *Fight Club* through their shared escalation of collective attempts to escape advanced capitalism, where contradictions and failures intensify their connection through the post-Cold War dominance of global capitalism. Even if these novels are potentially nostalgic for postmodernism's misery, they reopen debates of if and how postmodernism remains relevant through their dramatised repetitions of it. The novels paradoxically reframe concerns of postmodernism through this repetition, rather than simply resisting cultural change or overstating succession.

Digital Culture: Or, the Logic of Postmodernism in *Taipei*

The disillusionment with a superficial cultural change that masks an underlying capitalist continuum connects *Taipei*'s cyclical hopelessness to postmodernism. It is not simply the difficulty of compartmentalising postmodernism that extends its legacy, but how Lin's novel dramatises this through repetition. The emptiness of digital technology and hedonism exacerbate the characters' inability to imagine a better future, partly destabilising the distinction between periods of postmodernism to foreground the hopelessness of this endless present. This resonates with Paolo Virno's claim that postmodernism incorporates a process of repetition and recognition into an eternal

present that replaces social transformation with déjà vu. Capitalism's dominance means 'time is turned to stone,' like postmodernism's scepticism towards radical transformation, meaning a 'vortex of change cannot hide the monotonous repetition of unalterable archetypes.'[477] Virno describes this as a postmodern déjà vu, where 'The memory of the present is juxtaposed to the perception of the present,' dislocating past and present through a repetition without meaningful alteration.[478] Here, 'past-*form*, applied to the present, is exchanged for a past-*content*, which the present will repeat with obsessive loyalty.'[479] By repeating postmodernism apparently unchanged, *Taipei* produces a comparable dissonance where the form of postmodernism is repeated within a contemporary digital context. By repeating rather than remembering, Lin's novel locates postmodernism within the contemporary moment largely unchanged. This produces a disorientating misrecognition that foregrounds an eternal present, only partly obscured by superficial cultural shifts. The fluidity between apparently distinct periods dramatises the novel's cyclical hopelessness as a symptom of an inability to radically transform advanced capitalism, articulated through the novel's repetition of postmodernism.

Hedonism and consumerism's emptiness simply distract the characters in *Taipei* from their inability to transform their meaningless existence or empty futures. Lin's novel follows the hedonistic boredom of a young writer, Paul, who mediates his isolation and anxiety with consumerism. The characters' main interests – filming themselves, checking their social media accounts, attending parties, and taking drugs – stand-in for an absent belief in their future. Yet, the activities' emptiness reinforces the characters' inability to achieve fulfilment, while also reinforcing capitalism's excesses, even via seemingly countercultural activities. Drugs that increase serotonin levels and should theoretically make the characters happy are reduced to a form of detachment, exemplified when Paul says 'Once we're on MDMA we won't care.'[480] Alethia, an acquaintance Paul briefly becomes obsessed with after she interviews him, summarises this sense of inadequacy when she says, 'the world can't provide us with enough to

[477] Virno, *Déjà Vu and the End of History*, p. 181.
[478] Ibid., p. 13.
[479] Ibid., p. 18.
[480] Tao Lin, *Taipei* (Edinburgh & London: Canongate, 2013), p. 223.

satisfy us.'[481] The underlying disillusionment of the characters' patterns of consumption repeats the detached apathy of postmodernism within a contemporary setting.

Lin's characters perpetuate their disillusionment through a hypocritical escapism produced by their consumption, simultaneously upholding the system making them miserable. In a culture sustained by an irresolvable desire to consume, the impossibility of attaining happiness becomes the logical conclusion of an ever-expanding system. This misery is perpetuated in a semi-abstract way, since the characters remain unable to fully comprehend or articulate its connection to their hedonism. This intensified disappointment with their lives and society is exemplified when, during a drug-fuelled reflective moment, Paul and his girlfriend Erin agree they 'felt depressed in a new and scary way' but fail to alter their behaviour.[482] Their reflection without action results in a partial awareness of a deadlock they are unable or unwilling to confront through direct action. They are not specifically talking about a shared awareness of an unobtainable culturally fuelled desire. Nevertheless, their abstract negative emotions resonate with an inability to express or pinpoint the cause of their hedonistically-mediated unhappiness, comparable to Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*. As Byung-Chul Han suggests, 'today, even excess is being pocketed by Capital, which strips it of its emancipatory potential entirely.'[483] Their expressions of desire cannot subversively resist dominant power structures, or free them from their disillusionment. As Han suggests, it perpetuates the inescapable dominance of advanced capitalism, where 'liberation gives way to renewed subjugation.'[484] It is not simply that Paul and Erin's narcissistic hedonism reinforces the mechanisms of a capitalist system they are disillusioned by. Even an awareness of this contradiction reinforces their entrapment, foregrounding the hypocrisy and hopelessness that defines their existence.

Paul and Erin's attempted escapism eventually reinforces their entrapment, offering only momentary respite before becoming tainted. This is epitomised by the description of their hallucinations outside McDonalds: 'They regularly reminded each

[481] Ibid., p. 127.
[482] Ibid., p. 218.
[483] Byung-Chul Han, *Psycho-Politics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. by Erik Butler (London & New York: Verso, 2017), p. 52.
[484] Ibid., p. 1.

other that the LSD would soon start weakening, as it continued intensifying, to a degree that Paul could sense the presence of a metaphysical distance, from where, if crossed, he would not be able to return, therefore needed to focus.'[485] Although it appears to provide a quasi-transcendental distance from reality, this is not only illusory, but also based upon a hedonistic excess that reinforces an unrestrained pursuit of one's desires. Their attempts to escape into a hallucinatory alternate reality is both terrifying and disorientating, providing a more immediate relation to a void that reinforces the ineffectuality of their escapism rather than a satisfying alternative. They are caught in a feedback loop that perpetuates their misery, accelerating rather than alleviating their isolation through a never-ending cycle of intoxicating self-medication, obscuring how this perpetuates their present misery and absent future.

In *Taipei*, stunted emotional expression extends postmodernism's apathy and isolation, but it does so by emphasising a desire for emotional interaction and validation. The characters fluctuate between a disinterested calmness and a persistent underlying horror with their existence, presenting detachment from a bleak reality as their only reliable coping mechanism. On one occasion, Paul also demonstrates a 'combination of indifference and vague resentment' towards Alethia as his brief post-interview obsession with her diminishes.[486] This suggests a complex layering of internalised and guarded emotions that are otherwise physically repressed. On another occasion, while searching for his friend Kyle, Paul uses a 'precariously near-earnest tone' in his internal monologue.[487] In it, he states that he was 'lost in the world,' suggesting a desire to express emotions inhibited by apathy and detachment, which remains internalised.[488] The characters' interactions alludes to an inner world detached from the immediacy of their physical interactions, replicating their failed attempts to escape their hopelessness through intoxication and technology.

The characters' overarching emotional detachment connects *Taipei* more explicitly to blank fiction than posthumanism. Rosi Braidotti claims 'the postmodern moment' has been – or is in the process of being – replaced by posthumanism,

[485] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 202.
[486] Ibid., p. 128.
[487] Ibid., p. 7.
[488] Ibid.

reconfiguring exhaustion as 'virtual state of creative becoming.'[489] This posthuman, 'technologically mediated' self resonates with the characters' recurring interactions through digital platforms, but which cannot produce the 'essence as joy' through the interconnectedness Braidotti describes.[490] Instead, Paul uses technology to detach from his emotions, from his friends, and from the physical world he inhabits. When participating in a university campus panel, an intoxicated Paul expresses a 'robot-like extroversion' that contradictorily combines an outspoken sociability with emotional, mental and experiential forms of detachment.[491] His actions cause a confused tension, combined with a hedonistic regression of his subjectivity that partly dehumanises him, as he functions without thought or emotion, detaching his repetitive actions from an explicit sense of subjectivity. The robotic coldness of Paul's actions are also projected out onto his construction of the world he interacts with through references to technology. Eyelids are likened to computer screens because they can both 'display anything imaginable, so had infinite depth, but as physical surfaces were nearly depthless.'[492] Although technology's superficiality is given depth through its boundless creative possibilities, unlike Braidotti's posthumanism, for Paul this arises from isolation rather than interconnectedness. He constructs by projecting onto rather than interacting with the world around him: 'The unindividualized, shifting mass of everyone else would be a screen, distributed throughout the city, onto which he'd project the movie of his uninterrupted imagination.'[493] When viewing the world through these detached technologically mediated lenses, it becomes less a question of understanding or interaction. Instead, a process of creating through detachment is prioritised, which is imposed onto the world Paul encounters. Digital technology is integral to Paul's daily existence, providing the only temporary release from his overwhelming despair through a cold, numb and joyless detachment.

Even empathy is forged at an indirect distance, and frequently mediated by technology, exemplified by an online video Paul watches alone at a friend's party. In it,

[489] Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, pp. 11, 17.
[490] Ibid., pp. 48, 171.
[491] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 112.
[492] Ibid., p. 170.
[493] Ibid., p. 15.

he sees ‘obese people screaming in pain earnestly while exercising and being screamed at motivationally, in what seemed to be a grotesque parody, or something, of something. Paul felt strong aversion to the video, and also like he’d already experienced this exact situation.’[494] Paul’s empathy arises from failed intimacy exacerbated by anxiety and depression that, for him, provides a comparable form of suffering. His emotional response is inward looking, perpetuating this misery through physical and emotional detachment. Internalised personal dissatisfaction exacerbates the ‘uncomplicated feeling of bleakness’ Paul describes, generating his ‘bleak sensation of unsatisfying catharsis from having accurately, he felt, expressed himself.’[495] Paul’s desire to express himself results in a dissatisfaction with his existence, where detachment protects against profound sadness. He claims ‘his heart, unlike him, was safely contained, away from the world,’ suggesting emotional detachment stands-in for an inability to physically retreat.[496] However, the articulation of his feelings does not resolve this hopelessness, since Paul lacks any insight of what to do with these emotions. Paul’s attempts to articulate a sadness he struggles to locate – from describing how ‘he felt depressed, but didn’t know why,’ to ‘feeling always incompletely satisfied’ – perpetuating a complexity Paul neither understands nor can escape.[497] Catharsis therefore only exists for these characters as a form of emotional detachment rather than fulfilment, emphasising an empty hopelessness they are forced to endure.

Paul’s dislocated subjective isolation is therefore more consistent with the blankness of postmodernism than the interconnected joy of posthumanism. James Annesley describes the apathetic characters of blank fiction as defined by ‘indifference and indolence,’ where their bodies become indistinct, ‘blurred by cosmetics, narcotics, disease and brutality’ exhibited by Lin’s characters.[498] Blank, emotionless responses define Paul’s interactions, including being ‘too cool’ to react, his ‘passively cooperative’ state, and being caught ‘on shoplifting autopilot.’[499] He floats through a series of coldly detached interactions shaped by narcissism and neuroticism, including his marriage to

[494] Ibid., p. 49.
[495] Ibid., pp. 13, 56.
[496] Ibid., p. 40.
[497] Ibid., pp. 53, 37.
[498] Annesley, *Blank Fictions*, p. 1.
[499] Lin, *Taipei*, pp. 39, 45, 138.

Erin, which dissolves into a largely platonic process of mutual self-reflection. Yet, in both *Taipei* and a range of blank fictional texts, anxiety is always ready to breach the surface of this cool, calm apathy. The cold yet manic disillusionment of Bateman in *American Psycho* – which he describes as being 'empty, devoid of feeling' – is periodically undermined when he experiences 'a major-league anxiety attack.'[500] Similarly, the tortured detachment of Dennis in *Frisk*, who describes himself as emotionally 'totally removed,' also presents himself 'so emotionally weird that I almost broke down' in his fictionalised account of killing a boy with whom he was obsessed.[501] *Taipei*'s characters repeat the tropes of blank fiction in their failed attempts to articulate their emotions, where apathy provides temporary escape from their isolation, absent futures and acute hopelessness.

Taipei's despair with contemporary capitalism, particularly the emptiness of digital culture, exacerbates the characters' inability to imagine a better future. Failed escapism collapses into drug fuelled digital narcissism, repeating postmodernism through the novel's dislocation of time through repetition. At one point, Paul comments on a McDonald's employee 'running a little,' to which Erin claims, 'it's sort of characteristic of our times,' emphasising a displacement of time via speed that is central to the text.[502] Their fast-paced drifting through a life mediated by technology, corporations and drugs, leaves them without the hope of a different or even imaginable future, obscuring linear progression through tautological repetition.

Initially, Paul claims to derive positive stimulation from this absent future, where 'the nothingness of the future had gained a framework-y somethingness that felt privately exciting.'[503] Yet, this brief and abstract optimism is quickly thrown into question. Shortly afterwards, Paul considers how the relationship between the past and present shapes his existence, asking: 'Did existence ever seem worked for? One seemed simply to be here, less an accumulation of moments than a single arrangement continuously gifted from some inaccessible future.'[504] The implicit positivity evoked by

[500] Ellis, *American Psycho*, pp. 266, 143.
[501] Cooper, *Frisk*, pp. 32, 93.
[502] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 195.
[503] Ibid., p. 8.
[504] Ibid., p. 12.

using the word ‘gift’ extends what soon reinforces the bleakness of his existence; a self-imposed isolation he perpetuates through digital platforms, leaving him feeling ‘mostly just silent and doomed.’[505] Paul describes a cultural influence that has made it desirable to ‘live in the present’ and ‘not dwell on the past,’ though the joy he derives from living in the moment is fleeting.[506] This prioritisation of the present leaves him goalless, drifting without direction or focus, where his only peace stems from temporary detachment via drugs and digital technology.

Digital culture extends and accelerates postmodernism’s fluidity and isolation, rather than producing a future beyond it. In contrast to Paul Mason’s leftist accelerationism, where technology produces an alternative future where ‘Postcapitalism will set you free,’ this is not representative of the experiences of *Taipei*’s characters.[507] Lin’s characters retain none of Mason’s optimism. Even if capitalism ‘*has reached the limits of its capacity to adapt*,’ this simply intensifies their hopelessness and inability to imagine a different or better future.[508] Digital technology has resulted in numerous empirical examples of hopelessness – from surveillance to its rampant hedonistic consumerism – that connects it to postmodern despair, echoed by the novel’s cynicism towards a digitally-produced alternative. This produces expressions of apathy towards the future, epitomised by Erin’s claim, ‘I don’t care, right now, about dying, but in the future I might not want to die.’[509] At best, she hopes to be able to feel something towards the future, but this is limited to the possibility of self-care, rather than an ability to imagine a radically different or better situation. This reinforces her despair, intensified further when aligned with Paul’s prioritisation of the present over an absent future. Although hope is not completely unimaginable, ambiguity undermines it, leaving only the endured misery of the present.

The novel’s depictions of social media use connectivity to create social distance through narcissistic detachment and mundane online activities. Paul describes being lost in either ‘a continuous cycle’ of refreshing social media until his day ‘was over,’ or

[505] Ibid., p. 40.
[506] Ibid., p. 75.
[507] Mason, *Postcapitalism*, p. 292.
[508] Ibid., p. xiii.
[509] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 141.

being immersed in a nightly routine of 'four to ten hours of looking at the internet, reading, masturbating, etc. until morning.'[510] In both instances, digital platforms enable him to temporarily escape, allowing him to forget the hopelessness he relentlessly endures, except during his drug-induced moments of detachment. Even his interactions are shaped by this habitual escapism into digital technology, such as when he goes to the cinema with Erin, and his friends Calvin and Maggie. In the cinema, they take drugs before admitting their intention to 'sit separately during the movie and communicate only through tweets.'[511] This oddly detached form of interaction is perfectly encapsulated when, during the taxi ride home, Paul says 'You should tweet it, stop talking about it,' shutting down a face-to-face dialogue about the film in favour of a more distanced interactive platform.[512] Here, Paul side-steps the emotional engagement, presenting a deep-rooted detachment that aligns him with postmodern apathy, despite claiming he desires the opposite.

On various occasions, even looking at each other is mediated by technology, making their connectivity a paradoxically narcissistic method of surveillance. The acceleration of digital technology provides overt cultural reference points that seemingly distinguish the contemporary moment from a largely pre-digital postmodernism. Yet, as *Taipei* dramatises, digital technology provides only superficial change that masks the extension of postmodernism, particularly its combined focus upon subjective experience and the inescapable dominance of normalised power structures. Their recording of mundane activities normalises and even invites surveillance culture, implying even their daily indifference is worthy of being recorded, exemplified when Paul records himself and his friends on his MacBook for no discernible reason. 'They looked at themselves, being recorded, on the screen – uniquely neither reflection nor movie, but viewable perspective – of Paul's MacBook, smiling sarcastically.'[513] The screen on which they watch themselves while recording imposes a familiar distance from where interaction and observation can safely take place. It falls somewhere between a film – which has already taken place – and a reflection, occurring in the present, but logged as a digital

[510] Ibid., pp. 76, 90.
[511] Ibid., p. 231.
[512] Ibid., p. 232.
[513] Ibid., p. 169.

memory. This narcissistic act exposes a self-interest that replaces engaged interaction, particularly when the characters gaze at themselves rather than each other. If 'It's not worth doing at all if it's not filmed,' as Paul says about the orgy he discusses having with Erin, Maggie and Calvin, the characters' actions are not only mediated by technology, but also defined and validated by it.[514]

Paul notes how technology plays an increasingly central and pervasive cultural role, replacing the physical with a digitally abstract existence:

> technology seemed more likely to permanently eliminate life by uncontrollably fulfilling its only function: to indiscriminately convert matter, animate or inanimate, into computerized matter, for the sole purpose, it seemed, of increased functioning, until the universe was one computer. Technology, an abstraction, undetectable in concrete reality, was accomplishing its concrete task.[515]

This is not entirely true for Paul whose physical actions remain apparent. However, his actions are mediated by a digitised landscape and frequently de-prioritised in favour of the technology that makes him more sedentary and withdrawn. Digital technology's connective potential intensifies rather than alleviates the characters' emotional detachment, offering only superficial differences from a pre-digital postmodernism that ultimately extends capitalism's dominance.

Taipei foregrounds a connection to American literary postmodernism through a disillusionment with consumer culture it shares with Ellis' *Less Than Zero*. Ellis' protagonist, Clay, similarly drifts through a series of empty and emotionally distant interactions with his affluent L.A. peers. Instead of being plot driven, the text recounts a series of hedonistic interactions, spiralling into sexual and narcotic amorality. Like Paul in *Taipei*, Clay's detachment presents an air of cool that guards his actual emotions. This is exemplified when Clay's friend, Rip, has abducted and drugged a twelve year old girl. In an attempt to dissuade Rip from raping her, Clay says: 'But you don't need anything. You have everything.'[516] The novel's critique of consumerism is staged through a combination of boredom, privilege, and uninhibited desire, articulating a thirst

[514] Ibid., p. 223.
[515] Ibid., pp. 166-167.
[516] Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), p. 189.

for an uncommodified rebellion to counteract the characters' emptiness. Yet, Clay's disgust also foregrounds his apathy, complicating the ethical stance he appears to take, saying 'I don't think it's right' before walking away.[517] This makes his complicit rejection of Rip's actions a metaphor for the novel's critique of consumerism, which Lin's novel repeats, albeit less extremely. The momentary countercultural escapism provides a way of enduring advanced capitalism, becoming an act of consumerism where despair is tolerated by apathetic malaise in both novels. *Taipei* can be read as a quasi-rewrite of *Less Than Zero*, repeating many of its central features, relocating them largely unchanged within a twenty-first century context defined by digital technology.

The novels' despair with consumer capitalism is reinforced by the protagonists' meaningless indifference. *Taipei*'s despair literalises *Less Than Zero*'s title through Paul's desire to escape his existence by becoming a negative entity, rather than simply non-existent:

> He wanted to hide by shrinking past zero, through the dot at the end of himself, to a negative size, into an otherworld, where he would find a place […] to be alone and carefully build a life in which he might be able to begin, at some point, to think about what to do about himself.[518]

Paul further echoes *Less Than Zero*'s allusions to disappearing as an attempt – or at least a desire – to escape. In Ellis' novel, the phrase 'Disappear Here' becomes a recurring motif for escape. This ranges representationally from the ambiguous advertising billboard that 'freaks [Clay] out a little' and causes him to accelerate away, to Julian's drug-induced escapism, where it immediately precedes the line, 'The syringe fills with blood.'[519] In each instance, despite their differences, disappearing is intrinsically connected to escape. Like the references to it in Ellis' text, Paul's escapism seem to be fleeting at best. He is trapped in an eternal consumerist present, appeased only by digital technology and narcotics. Paul cannot envisage an alternative future, making forgetting a further coping mechanism that offers him a direct form of solace, while also reinforcing the novel's connection to postmodernism.

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[517] Ibid.
[518] Ibid., pp. 160-161.
[519] Ellis, *Less Than Zero*, pp. 38, 183.

Recognisable cultural reference points are central to the authenticity of *Taipei* and *Less Than Zero*, but function differently in each text. Ellis' references to branding and music – from Blondie to Giorgio Armani, or MTV – grounds his novel in eighties American culture. Although *Taipei* appears to do the same – using MacBooks, MDMA, and Twitter to locate the text within twenty-first century culture – this is complicated by the recurring references to nineties music, including the Smashing Pumpkins and Nirvana. This 'forgetting' of the present produces a déjà vu effect that extends the novel's postmodern influence, creating a point of recognition that makes the reader momentarily lose sight of the text's historical location.

In *Taipei*, Paul references the Smashing Pumpkins on three occasions, particularly the song 'Today,' inferring a cyclical link to nineties concerns through a deliberate dislocation of time. The significance of this music choice is furthered by the message of 'Today,' where the assertion that 'Today is the greatest day I've ever known' becomes a cynical comment upon a bored suffering forged by an absent future.[520] When one 'Can't live for tomorrow, tomorrow's much too long,' and 'wanted more than life could ever grant me,' Billy Corgan's lyrics resonate with Paul's dissatisfactions.[521] Later, Paul is caught shoplifting the follow-up Smashing Pumpkins album, *Melancholy and the Infinite Sadness*, whose title reinforces the morose sentiments of *Taipei*. Paul specifically mentions 'Zero' and 'Tonight, Tonight' as being on the disk he steals. 'Zero' provides the most obvious connection to the textual themes, exemplified by the line: 'Emptiness is loneliness, and loneliness is cleanliness, and cleanliness is godliness, and God is empty just like me.'[522] By contrast, 'Tonight, Tonight' offers a more positive image of a future, connected to the present, where 'The impossible is possible tonight.'[523] Yet, even this belief in the possibility of a change that seems impossible within *Taipei* is defined by loss – 'You can never ever leave without leaving a piece of youth' – and emotional detachment – 'The more you change the less you feel.'[524] Like the textual reference to the pop-punk band The Ataris' EP *Look*

[520] Smashing Pumpkins, 'Today', *Siamese Dream* (Virgin records, 1993) [on CD].
[521] Ibid.
[522] Smashing Pumpkins, 'Zero', *Melancholy and the Infinite Sadness* (Virgin Records, 1995) [on CD].
[523] Smashing Pumpkins, 'Tonight, Tonight', *Melancholy and the Infinite Sadness* (Virgin Records, 1995) [on CD].
[524] Ibid.

Forward To Failure, momentary hope in the future is undermined by detachment and failure, reinforced by the commodification of these previously countercultural genres (grunge and punk).

Taipei's musical references are also comparable to *American Psycho*, where Bateman's extended monologues on eighties pop reflect capitalist commodification. Bateman's preference for the more commercial Genesis over the 'too artsy, too intellectual' early material, or Huey Lewis and the News' sophistication when they became 'gratefully, less rebellious,' make his position clear.[525] Artistic merit is measured by commercial success, where market value dictates its overall worth. Although Lin's references to grunge combines commercial success with a rebelliousness Bateman would find off putting, it echoes *American Psycho*'s critical commentary on advanced capitalism's dominance. Mark Fisher argues grunge's mainstream popularity epitomises capitalism's commodification of counterculture, embodying the hopelessness of *Taipei*'s characters. Instead of representing something different from – or outside – mainstream culture, for Fisher, alternative and independent become 'styles, in fact *the* dominant styles, within the mainstream.'[526] This is evident from the global success of iconic artists such as Nirvana, where Kurt Cobain's 'objectless rage' symbolised a generation 'whose every move was anticipated, tracked, bought and sold before it had even happened.'[527] If for Cobain, 'every move was a cliché scripted in advance' and 'even realizing it is a cliché,' this is also true of Paul, for whom referring to grunge is a cliché.[528] *Taipei*'s allusions to grunge bands cannot feign countercultural rebellion, except through a nostalgia that forgets or ignores this historical relation to capitalism Fisher describes, connecting them also to *Zac's Control Panel*.

When dissent is inevitably commodified, the detachment of forgetting offers Paul another way of counteracting his hopelessness. Paul claims 'remembering seemed to require as much, or much more, energy as imagining,' making creativity an alternative to remembering.[529] Yet, due to the text's recurring references to absent futures that

[525] Ellis, *American Psycho*, pp. 128, 340.
[526] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 9.
[527] Ibid.
[528] Ibid.
[529] Lin, *Taipei*, p. 201.

reinforce the bleakness of the characters' present existence, this process of forgetting becomes more directly connected to apathetic detachment than a quasi-creative coping mechanism. The MacBook recordings of himself stand in for Paul's apparently absent memory, though do little more than offer narcissistic snapshots of the recent, superficial introspective past. If remembering requires more energy than imagination, at best, Paul creates reality by projecting his introspective narrative present, rather than consciously engaging with his environment or its past. Like disappearing in Ellis' novel, forgetting emphasises the failure of destructive counter-movements' ability to surpass capitalism, and the dislocation this generates.

Ambiguity becomes structurally incorporated rather than remaining a countercultural critique, intensifying this enclosure within capitalism through failure and commodification. Paul encapsulates this ambiguity when articulating a misery shaped by dislocation and forgetfulness: 'He felt like a digression that had forgotten from what it digressed and was continuing ahead in a confused, choiceless searching.'[530] Dislocation within capitalist society causes Paul to lose sight of the possibility of radical transformation. This makes forgetting a means of detachment, much like hedonism and technology, that temporarily alleviates his hopelessness, while also reinforcing the conventions of a society he cannot escape.

The novel positions forgetting as both a coping mechanism of Lin's characters, and a connection between twenty-first century American culture and postmodernism. By temporarily obscuring rather than escaping hopelessness, Lin's characters present means of tolerating rather than surpassing an advanced capitalist culture that generates their misery. Ultimately, forgetting perpetuates this hopelessness, repeating a postmodern inability to imagine alternative futures that produces an eternal present. *Taipei* dramatises this by uncritically repeating postmodernism, exemplified by Paul's disillusionment, replicating its relevance within contemporary discourse. The text's derivative repetition of *Less Than Zero* is recycled through a digital technological revolution that masks the absence of epochal succession. Forgetting, like disappearing, creates a confused critique that can neither distinguish itself from capitalism, nor offer an alternative to it, emphasising the cyclical relevance of postmodernism through the

[530] Ibid., p. 67.

limit of capitalism. Hopelessness becomes a way of recognising a repetition of inescapable despair, defined by a digital culture that extends rather than succeeds the superficiality and isolation associated with postmodernism. Shifts in American culture since the late eighties fail to offer a coherent counter-point to a postmodernism they supposedly succeed. These superficial changes mask an underlying continuation recognised in *Taipei* through a postmodern déjà vu produced within digital culture.

Consumption & Contradiction: Cyclical Failed Resistance in *You Too Can Have A Body Like Mine*

You Too intertwines consumer culture and subversion within depictions of consumption, repeating facets of postmodernism and its absent radical transformation. Where *Taipei* uses hedonistic and technological consumption to escape capitalist society, *You Too* references food specifically. Consumption includes the absorption of resistance by capitalism, making it an unsuccessful means of undermining this inescapable framework from within. The novel represents this in a variety of ways, all of which are connected to the supermarket Wally's. This contrasts *Sadie: The Sadist*'s representations of waste, where reuse and the economically unconsumable are intertwined. In *You Too* everything is consumable, comparable to earlier postmodern novels like *Fight Club*, where even forms of resistance are largely defined by an inescapable capitalist framework. Like *Taipei*, *You Too* dramatises a repetition of postmodernism through hopelessness, overstating a sameness to draw explicit connections between nineties and twenty-first century American culture. Yet, unlike *Taipei*, where the characters' desire to forget perpetuates their cyclical experience of hopelessness, the repeated failure to forget or resist advanced capitalism in *You Too* defines the novel's representations of hopelessness. The inability to disentangle subversion from its incorporation within capitalist consumption locates its failed resistance within a wider disillusionment with stasis, generating the text's hopelessness.

Subversion becomes intertwined with the normalising capitalist logic it challenges, emphasising the difficulty of creating positive futures that underpin the novel's misery. The dissonance between the unnamed protagonist's thoughts and

actions reflect this tension, particularly when she claims 'I was aware that what I said I wanted wasn't really what I wanted at all.'[531] This occurs when she requests 'real food' rather than the canned food in the cupboard.[532] Immediately, the protagonist recognises she has said this 'not knowing what I meant exactly but remembering the phrase from the commercials.'[533] Significantly, she acknowledges the subconscious influence marketing has upon her desires, particularly when the food she desires is a Kandy Kake. If Kandy Kakes have no nutritional value it is not simply the influence of advertising over the protagonist's desires, but also how this reshapes what she considers to be 'real food.' This resonates with Slavoj Žižek's description of how social control must sustain an individual's perception of their freedom when 'free choice is elevated into a supreme value,' creating a complex and subtle form of 'unfreedom' through the perception of choice.[534] Similarly, the protagonist is conditioned to desire Kandy Kakes, but to view this as part of her freedom to choose, directly connecting her literal act of consumption to consumerist capitalist society. Her compulsion to perpetuate the values she feels distanced from foregrounds one of the novel's central issues – how to relate to an unreachable outside of a totalising capitalist system. This entanglement underpins the text's cynicism towards radical transformation central to its repetition of postmodernism.

Consumption, particularly of food, is central to *You Too*'s subversive acts. An inability to position consumption as exclusively subversive or systemic reflects advanced capitalism's fluidity, producing new acts of subversion that ultimately fail. The frequently referenced snack, Kandy Kakes, presents the subversive qualities of a heavily advertised commodity, emphasising the problematic intertwining of rebellion with capitalism. Kandy Kakes are referenced throughout the novel, initially through recurring advertisements that emphasise their status as a popular commodity, but eventually as a subversive commodity. In the opening chapter, the protagonist makes a connection between her housemate's hair and 'Kandy Kat,' the Kandy Kakes cartoon mascot, before recounting a commercial where a cartoon cake evades consumption by Kandy

[531] Alexandra Kleeman, *You Too Can Have A Body Like Mine* (London: 4th Estate, 2017), p. 46.
[532] Ibid.
[533] Ibid.
[534] Slavoj Žižek, *The Relevance of the Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge & Medford: Polity, 2019), p. 28.

Kat.[535] Even here, consumption intertwines the consumer and the consumed, since just as Kandy Kat is about to eat the cake, 'the little cake opens its own mouth hugely and eats Kandy Kat in one bite,' reinforcing the complex relation between subversive and systemic consumption.[536] Significantly, Kandy Kakes are notably described as 'a pure food,' or something partly masquerading as food, due to their absence of nutritious content.[537] This is alluded to in an advert, which mythologises this dubious quality:

> Rumor has it the Kandy Kore is not strictly edible per se, in the sense that the special materials that give it its unique flavor are not thought to be made of food, specifically. No food that I've ever eaten shimmers with such beautiful, rich shades of green and pink. It's like eating a gasoline rainbow, if gasoline tasted good.[538]

Kandy Kakes undermine the very concept of food in their appearance to offer a nutritious value they fail to possess. Even its slogan – '*We know who you really are*' – notably 'failed to sell anything,' undermining its enticement to consume.[539] Their absence of value makes them a miracle food for The Church that, combined with their inordinately long shelf-life, undermines the value of both physical and accelerated capitalist consumption. Yet, this reflects what Žižek calls 'revolution without revolution,' or 'a vision of social change with no actual change.'[540] For Žižek, subversion without radically altering capitalism simply reinforces the consumerism it appears to subvert, suggesting 'coffee without caffeine, chocolate without sugar, beer without alcohol' exemplify market expansion repackaged as subversion.[541] Similarly, Kandy Kakes only undermine specific features of capitalism that generate their niche market connected to The Church, rather than undermine capitalist consumption holistically.

The novel uses pragmatism to stand-in for the inability to succeed or radically transform advanced capitalism, replacing alternative grand narratives with subversion through consumption. Pragmatism arises from a failure to step outside capitalism,

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[535] Kleeman, *You Too*…, p. 13.
[536] Ibid., p. 14.
[537] Ibid., p. 137.
[538] Ibid., p. 63.
[539] Ibid., p. 45.
[540] Slavoj Žižek, *The Courage of Hopelessness: Chronicles of a Year of Acting Dangerously* (Milton Keynes: Allen Lane, 2017), p. 261.
[541] Ibid.

shaped by a desire for socio-political transformation. Jean Baudrillard claims American culture 'draws the logical, pragmatic consequences from everything that can possibly be thought,' making a direct connection to pragmatism through his claim that in America '*Utopia has been achieved*.'[542] Yet, in *You Too*, instead of an America that 'gets on with turning things into material realities,' pragmatism is defined by compromise and contradiction, where resistance only realises the logic of capitalist consumption it rejects.[543] If pragmatism offers any form of acceptance in *You Too*, it is the protagonist's disillusionment with an uncrossable limit that intensifies her hopelessness. Instead of achievable resistance, each attempt to detach or undermine capitalism is compromised through an inability to escape it – from The Church's stock market-funded outsider community, to Michael's accidental promotion of veal. Pragmatism becomes a repetition of sameness – between systemic and subversive consumption – that foregrounds the text's repetition of postmodernism, where no lasting release, or successful compromise, can be produced through resistance.

Like the novel's references to Kandy Kakes, the protagonist seeks out pragmatic methods of subverting capitalism through consumption. She infers the possibility of subversion from within, and through a process of incorporation, either within the body or capitalism, directly linked to consumption. This is clearest when she relocates the biological process of consumption as a metaphor for resistance, asking 'Was consumption a form of infiltration?'[544] When consumption is viewed literally as an act of infiltration, where a foreign entity enters the body and is absorbed, it seemingly acts like the mythological Trojan Horse, infiltrating the enemy's walls to destroy it from within. Although this metaphor draws upon destruction from within, connecting it to a subversive act from inside capitalism, it relies upon an exteriority from which this foreign entity can enter. When an exteriority beyond capitalism is impossible, it complicates how consumption can function as a subversive and pragmatic act. If a graceful consumer is someone who 'could consume without being consumed in turn,' as the protagonist claims, this subversion of capitalism is reliant upon simultaneously engaging

[542] Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. by Chris Turner (London & New York: Verso, 2010), p. 106.
[543] Ibid.
[544] Kleeman, *You Too*…, p. 130.

in and resisting consumption, emphasising its paradoxical status.[545] Like the description of infiltration through consumption, where a clear exteriority is presumed, the graceful consumer relies upon a pure act of consumption that cannot be commodified by capitalism, comparable to the purifying acts of violence in *Empire of the Senseless* and *Fight Club*. Yet, the novel's recurring combination of subversive and systemic acts of consumption suggests this is impossible, inferring a more complex relation between these two positions.

The Church's ritualistic 'Uneating' alludes to a comparable dualistic consumption, where the Kandy Kakes' lack of nutritional value undoes the body's systemic process of eating.[546] This is significant because consumption becomes a way of circumventing consumption, since the act is continued but the function of obtaining nutrition is undermined. By 'eating the food of the dead,' which contains no nutritional value, the protagonist claims 'I was no longer a member of the food chain. I was part of something else.' [547] This suggests a transformative possibility arising from this contradictory subversion, linked to The Church. Kandy Kakes locate an undoing of systemic consumption within the physical act of consumption, intertwining its transformative potential with the capitalism it also undermines.

Kandy Kakes' contradictory subversion undermines, but is also undermined by, capitalism, suggesting even counter-positions are integrally defined by capitalism's inescapability. When considering a Kandy Kakes advert, the protagonist describes 'Light consuming light, the desire for sustenance a type of sustenance in itself,' a comparably non-nutritious consumption to The Church's obsessive detachment from sustenance, but reinforced in a different way.[548] A desire for fulfilment, rather than actual fulfilment, similarly drives advanced capitalist consumption, making absence central to both processes. Kandy Kakes cannot be considered a purely subversive food, since they still fulfil capitalism's requirements of a commodity: as something that can be marketed, bought and consumed to generate revenue. This is clearest in the increased demand for the product generated through The Church's ritualistic use of them,

[545] Ibid., p. 31.
[546] Ibid., p. 230.
[547] Ibid., p. 279.
[548] Ibid., p. 112.

combined with the extensive ad campaigns, resulting in Wally's running out of stock. While The Church's use of Kandy Kakes undermines the bodily functions of consumption, the ritualistic value they place on Kandy Kakes increases their desirability, reinforcing the systemic processes of capitalism.

Subsequently, when the protagonist notes 'how much the logo [of The Church] looked like a Kandy Kake,' a further connection to capitalist consumption is inferred.[549] This is intensified when it is revealed The Church owned shares in a number of corporate entities, including a majority share of 'sixty-seven percent of all Wally's stores.'[550] This explicit investment in the stock market, particularly supermarket chains, forges an ironic connection that plays on the notion of consumption. It undermines The Church's status as an outsider community, shielding its members from capitalism, to reinforce the contradictory and futile attempts to resist capitalism absolutely. Similarly, it means the ritualistic use of Kandy Kakes increases the dividends returned from their share in Wally's. This increased demand partly funds the outsider organisation from within a capitalist free market through a product ingested to circumvent traditional forms of consumption. Although Kandy Kakes supposedly undermine capitalist processes, their desirability within The Church make them a popular and frequently unavailable commodity. This allows The Church to profit from a ritualistic consumption that foregrounds the contradictory position subversion adopts in the novel. The failure to subvert capitalism through systemically internal consumption undermines the possibility of radical transformation, reinforcing the pervasive dominance of capitalism that repeats postmodernism's cynicism.

This inescapable capitalist framework informs Kleeman's depiction of mimicry, foregrounding the necessarily contradictory features of construction and subversion. Again, this reinforces the novel's repetition of postmodernism, particularly *Fight Club*, where collective action seeks to usher in a new relation to advanced capitalism. Yet, like the commodification of rebellion or the failures of collective action, *You Too*'s protagonist fails to produce anything more than an intensification of consumption. Pure transformation is located within consumption rather than violence, but repeats the

[549] Ibid., p. 143.
[550] Ibid., p. 245.

themes of collective self-destruction through the protagonist's problematic relation to societal consumption through acts of personal consumption.

From the use of a quotation by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the novel's epigraph, Kleeman's postmodern and post-structuralist influences are explicit. This influence is extended by the protagonist's flirtations with madness, becoming, and escapism as potentially transformative. The quote describes 'a veritable becoming' arising from a process of mimicry were 'something else entirely is going on: not imitation at all but a capture of code, surplus value of code.'[551] This process of becoming through a transformative imitation connects to the protagonist's desire for transformation. From the beginning of the novel, she describes a personal disorientation that is exacerbated by her paranoia that her housemate is trying to replicate her identity. This is exemplified when her housemate cuts off a large portion of her hair, claiming it 'was making me feel un-myself,' which makes her appear aesthetically closer to the protagonist.[552] An unstable sense of identity becomes more pronounced for the protagonist as textual references shift from her housemates imitation to her food-focused attempt to achieve personal transformation. This imitative form of transformation escalates through her interactions with The Church, particularly their obsession with purifying its members of the outside world and their past through Kandy Kakes. Through The Church's ritualistic practices that mimic capitalist and biological consumption, the protagonist claimed to have 'escaped myself.'[553] However, this only temporarily alleviates what she calls 'the burden of worry over what I was, what was becoming of me.'[554] Subversion and the inability to escape capitalism relies upon this process of mimicry, seeking an unattainable transformation that intensifies a potential bout of psychosis through consumption as the protagonist attempts to escape her disillusionment.

Both Kleeman's protagonist and the schizophrenic process encounter difficulties that undermine this systemically internal destabilisation. For Deleuze and Guattari, the schizophrenic is capitalism's 'inherent tendency brought to fulfilment, its surplus product, its proletariat, and its exterminating angel,' producing a destabilisation through

[551] Ibid., p. vii.
[552] Ibid., p. 12.
[553] Ibid., p. 195.
[554] Ibid., p. 203.

its acceleration of its principles.[555] This is also true of Kleeman's protagonist, who seeks out transformation through an acceleration of consumption positioned as a constructive undoing. This transformation is initially a positive 'expanding, becoming more,' enabling her to find 'a way out of her doomed self.' [556] However, it quickly takes on more overt characteristics of advanced capitalism, comparable to Bateman, the Parisian uprising and Project Mayhem. The 'surplus of themselves that they were willing to give away,' which 'Better people' supposedly have, echoes capitalism's surplus value.[557] This connection aligns becoming through self-improvement with the system generating the protagonist's dissatisfaction. The novel's prologue implies this surplus could be appropriated and redirected, though the textual examples that follow undermine this transformative potential. Specifically, the becoming connected to The Church perpetuates and intensifies many features of the capitalist society it supposedly resists – from the fragmentation of the members' identity, to the financial connections to Wally's and Kandy Kakes. Both the protagonist's potential madness and The Church's ritualistic consumption offers no exteriority to capitalism, simply the collective mobilisation of individual dissatisfactions that replicate the system they seek to escape.

This problem is exemplified by Michael, whose protest veal theft accelerates consumption as his act of rebellion becomes a countercultural selling point. He buys veal to save calves from consumption, making his plight flawed from the outset. Michael claims '*I couldn't do anything for the calves*,' being one man acting alone, but that he '*can do something for these cutlets*.'[558] However, his replication of consumption as subversion foregrounds the futile rather than transformative nature of his actions, counter-intuitively informed by his ineffectiveness. His protest consumption is reabsorbed, as 'the veal section had regrown – as though he had never been there.' [559] This makes his stance more radical, stealing the produce he cannot afford to purchase in increasing volumes. Yet, this too is undermined by Wally's expansion of veal stock, mistaking his theft for increased demand. Michael's attempts to protest consumption

[555] Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 38.
[556] Kleeman, *You Too…*, pp. 79, 228.
[557] Ibid., p. 75.
[558] Ibid., p. 27.
[559] Ibid., p. 26.

accelerates it, emphasising the impact of a 'demand that was his alone,' but in a way that intensifies systemic consumption.[560]

Michael becomes part of an advertisement campaign when he is discovered, systemically reabsorbing his act of protest. The slogan 'THIS VEAL'S A STEAL' exemplifies Wally's commodification of his rebellious act, using his theft as the unique selling point.[561] The increased veal stock in his local store is combined with a national ad campaign, escalating the damage of his actions. Even his fans' mimicry, as they 'shove bundle after bundle of veal into their bag,' mocks his protest, reducing it to a game the supermarket 'don't mind.'[562] Cruelly, this escalated theft is tolerated by Wally's who admit 'Often when they leave with the veal, they take other items with them.'[563] It is unclear if they purchase these other items, increasing the supermarket's revenue, or if they also steal them, making Michael's protest theft appear even more futile. Irrespective, Wally's indifference to this theft makes Michael's actions an exemplar of the hopelessness of undermining consumer culture.

The protagonist considers this problematic transformation, asking: 'Had he changed his mind? Had he been sued? Had someone stolen his picture and made it mean whatever they wanted?'[564] Wally's ad campaign provides the collective impact Michael desired, but through a process of commodification that undermines his intentions rather than the capitalist framework he stands against. Michael's symbolic act of futile defiance becomes a symbol of sanitised and accelerated consumption, transforming only how his actions are mobilised. The protagonist speculates further on this hopelessness: 'Maybe there was no way to definitively wreck anything anymore. No firm cores left to target, only an endless springy meshwork replenished by phantom hands.'[565] Michael's failure is intensified by the commodification of his rebellion, echoing Fisher's description of grunge, connecting the novel to nineties American culture. For both Michael and Fisher, advanced capitalism's fluidity makes traditional resistance

[560] Ibid.
[561] Ibid., p. 123.
[562] Ibid., p. 179.
[563] Ibid.
[564] Ibid., pp. 123-124.
[565] Ibid., p. 149.

impossible, perpetuating the dislocation subversion challenges and the hopeless inability to radically transform it.

You Too's failed collective and personal resistance represent contradiction through consumption, intertwining both capitalism and attempts to undermine it. Consumption is systemic and subjective, obscuring the boundaries between normative structures and systemic challenges through a conflation of these macro and micro drives. The confused Kandy Kakes slogan compliments Michael's contradictory resistance: 'HAVEN'T YOU NOT HAD ENOUGH?'[566] This rhetorical question alludes to a dissatisfaction with capitalist consumption through a double negative ('HAVEN'T', and ''NOT'), but through a consumer slogan that also embodies the systemic consumption it questions. This entwinement is furthered by Wally's branding of consumption as a form of freedom, replacing a freedom connected to revolutionary action and radical transformation. A Wally's employee describes how their products 'are good for you, or they work ceaselessly to destroy you from within,' connecting them to the novel's series of subversive forms of consumption.[567] The physical consumption Kandy Kakes align with freedom from within opposes Wally's systemic consumption, though both intensify systemic consumption through forms of branding.

Wally's claim 'Consumers are Creators' rebrands hyper-consumption as a freedom that masks their confusion and dissatisfaction.[568] The 'flexible shopping environment,' where 'products have no fixed place,' allows Wally's shoppers to creatively tailor their experience, fluidly expanding their consumption without constriction.[569] Yet, this simply encourages greater levels of consumption through the shoppers' inability to orientate themselves, rather than an explicit conscious choice to consume more. To ensure this disorientation is as efficient as possible, Wally's removes 'the possibility of loitering there without purpose and without any money,' maximising the monetisation of this confusion.[570] Customers cannot even appeal to staff for help, since they are directed to avoid '*abridging the customer's individualized buying journey*,'

[566] Ibid., p. 183.
[567] Ibid., p. 180.
[568] Ibid., p. 174.
[569] Ibid.
[570] Ibid., p. 267.

as this would be '*a detriment to desire evolution*.'[571] Shoppers can neither avoid nor slow the pace of their consumption, foregrounding the limits of their autonomy that underpin the store's narrow definition of freedom through rebranded consumption. This connects to Michael's theft, which become an alternative means of branding an undesirable product, further emphasising the limits of freedom. Fundamentally, transformation through consumption is only achieved systemically, through the commodification of subversion that expands into new markets, also found in *Empire of the Senseless*, *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*.

This subversion from within is closer to a postmodern parasitic critique of advanced capitalism than an accelerationist one. Mason's claim that 'We need to be unashamed utopians' implies a constructive vision and affirmative possibilities of digital technology that remains absent in the novel.[572] *You Too* makes no explicit connection to digital culture, removing the signifier of hope Mason aligns with the construction of post-capitalist society. Wally's flexible shopping experience is the nearest textual feature to the fluidity and fragmentation of digital culture, which simply intensifies the features of an advanced consumer capitalism. This infers a connection between the false autonomy of Wally's consumer freedom and the digital culture Mason describes. Like in *Taipei*, where digital technology provides a superficial escape that intensifies consumer culture, *You Too* presents a fluidity that resonates with digital culture that similarly emphasises the difficulty of superseding advanced capitalism.

This connects the novel more directly to Linda Hutcheon's description of postmodern critique as a politics that produces 'a strange kind of critique, one bound up, too, with its own *complicity* with power and domination.'[573] In *You Too*, each mode of resistance begins from an internal parasitic critique that is eventually subsumed within advanced capitalism. Individual and collective acts of resistance reinforce the mechanisms of the capitalist framework they seek to undermine or escape. Like the acts of resistance in *You Too*, Hutcheon's description of postmodernism relies upon a pragmatic critical position, which Mason also relies upon but conceptualises differently.

[571] Ibid., p. 169.
[572] Mason, *Postcapitalism*, p. 288.
[573] Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p. 4.

Ultimately, they share an inability to coherently position themselves against advanced capitalism. This connects each position to a nineties postmodern culture through their conceptualisation of subversion and alternatives from within an inescapable capitalist framework. Postmodern cynicism subsequently provides a critical measure by which proposed alternatives might continue to be judged, giving it a contemporary cultural currency that Kleeman's novel demonstrates through repetition. At one point, the protagonist's description of the world extends this connection between the contemporary and the postmodern: 'It was terrible the way resemblances ran wild through the things of the world, the way one place or time mimicked another, making you feel that you were going in circles, going nowhere at all.'[574] This passage's reference to superficial resemblances, appropriations dislocated from a clear historical context, repeats its features unchanged within contemporary culture. Dissatisfactions with advanced capitalism cannot be surpassed without a clear – but also absent – alternative to the fluid fragmentation perpetuated by both capitalism and postmodernism, illustrated by its repetition as a means of foregrounding this continuum.

The novel develops this repetition of postmodernism through its appropriation of canonical American texts. Connections to Ellis – disappearing in *Less Than Zero*, and Patrick Bateman's psychosis in *American Psycho* – reflect the protagonist's desire for nothingness and her loosening grip on reality. Yet, the novel's connection to *Fight Club* is most overt, particularly the attempts to construct alternatives through outsider communities that are ultimately subsumed within capitalism. Furthermore, the transition from tourist to terrorist appears in both *Fight Club* and *You Too*, using violence and food to facilitate resistance of capitalism. In *Fight Club*, Marla is described as a 'big tourist' for courting support groups, while Tyler Durden later suggests he and the unnamed protagonist have 'turned into the guerrilla terrorists of the service industry.'[575] Similarly, *You Too*'s protagonist describes how her housemate 'wanted to be a food tourist' due to her problematic eating behaviours, while the protagonist is later considered 'one of those nutri-terrorists like that veal guy.'[576] Each of the protagonists' radicalisation

[574] Kleeman, *You Too*…, p. 258.
[575] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, pp. 24, 81.
[576] Kleeman, *You Too*…, pp. 111, 119.

against advanced capitalism is depicted through a connection to food, facilitating the interactions they forge with outsider organisations. Therefore, *You Too*'s connection to *Fight Club* dramatises a contemporary repetition of postmodernism comparable to the inspiration *Taipei*'s draws from *Less Than Zero*.

Fight Club and *You Too* feature disillusioned men seeking escapism through outsider communities (fight club and The Church). The hyper-violent masculinity of fight club that temporarily gives the men meaning, tranquillity and distance from consumer culture in Chuck Palahniuk's novel resonates with the Disappearing Dad Disorder in *You Too*. This disorder, linked to The Church, illustrates a comparable breakdown of conventional masculinity, specifically, 'the breakdown of the single-earner family model' that perpetuated traditional masculine stereotypes.[577] For Kleeman's protagonist, these dads 'were just seeking a perfect life' in their attempts to escape capitalism, like fight club's men.[578] This means they were hoping for her secret to happiness: 'being free of the responsibility of yourself.'[579] Yet, these dads could not integrate into The Church, since 'They're too tied to the things they were responsible for, and the things they owned. Even though that's what they came here to escape.' [580] Their inability to forget demonstrates their failure to be accepted into an organisation that comparably fails to coherently distance itself from consumer capitalism.

Fight club and The Church position themselves as separatist organisations, but both simply localise an overtly capitalist system under a different name. Fight club's men remain in their jobs and communities, momentarily departing to a group that eventually relies upon capitalist consumption to fund its growth. This is exemplified by the members' unpaid production of luxury soap after becoming Project Mayhem. Although The Church provides a more recognisably separatist community, the ritualistic consumption of Kandy Kakes and the organisation's investment in stocks and shares replicates the problems Palahniuk depicts. The most notable distinction is how the novels locate male discontent, arising from their entrapment within capitalism. Where *Fight Club* superficially endorses this rage, *You Too* locates it within a critique of white

[577] Ibid., p. 65.
[578] Ibid., p. 66.
[579] Ibid., p. 247.
[580] Ibid., p. 213.

male privilege. The Disappearing Dad Disorder is described as a process occurring within minority communities that 'wasn't called a disorder until it started happening to well-off white people.'[581] This distinction exposes the necessity of locating *Fight Club* within a wider discussion of capitalism's intersection with gender and racial politics attempted by Kleeman's novel. However, this point of divergence cannot counteract the otherwise unchanged repetition of postmodernism in the novel, nor undermine the critical function of this dramatised repetition.

The process of forgetting as a resistance of consumer capitalism through outsider organisations provides a further connection between the novels. The Narrator of *Fight Club* creates his alter-ego, fight club and then Project Mayhem in an attempt to escape, making his forgetting a process of both personal detachment and collective creation. His dream-like state at the end of the novel reinforces his desire to escape through forgetting in whatever means is available to him, even if he ultimately fails to escape or radically transform this capitalist framework. Comparably, Kleeman's protagonist seeks to 'disappear myself' through her combination of implied psychosis and her interactions with The Church in an attempt to relieve her hopelessness.[582] She considers 'how much easier it would be to have fewer things to think about, or no things at all,' positioning forgetting as the simplest and most gratifying means of escapism.[583] This is facilitated through The Church, where its members forget their previous lives, attempting to become a 'child to Nothing.'[584] Their slogan alludes to a contradictory avoidance underpinning depictions of forgetting: 'ALL YOUR LIFE YOU'VE BEEN PASSIVE. NOW BE ACTIVE. ACTIVELY AVOID.'[585] The play on words between avoid (circumvent) and a void (nothingness) relies upon an impossible escape that forgetting seeks to appease through detachment. However, even forgetting is impossible for Kleeman's protagonist, who can only 'pretend to forget myself,' resulting in her expulsion from the Church.[586] She cannot forget a consumer capitalist framework and

[581] Ibid., p. 65.
[582] Ibid., p. 131.
[583] Ibid., p. 93.
[584] Ibid., p. 230.
[585] Ibid., p. 266.
[586] Ibid., p. 183.

she also cannot assimilate within The Church, returning her to a misery she must endure. Palahniuk and Kleeman's protagonists share an inability to detach from, or even think beyond a totalising capitalist framework, locating *You Too*'s hopelessness within a postmodern cynicism towards radical transformation.

The monetisation of outsider communities problematically connects resistance to capitalism in both novels, reinforcing the impossibility of detaching from advanced capitalism. Fight club rejects consumerism but cannot expand into Project Mayhem without the revenue produced by selling soap. The group parasitically feed off a system they are not only complicit with, but also replicate through the unpaid exploitation of its members. The Church's connection to Kandy Kakes repeats this contradiction, since they had 'a need to keep bringing money in for as long as we all still had physical bodies.'[587] A Wally's employee, assumedly not a member, claims 'Their religious practices devote no thought to the complexities of supply and demand,' responding to the replacing of Kandy Kakes with fliers advertising The Church.[588] Although this theft undermines Wally's accumulation of wealth their increased scarcity raises demand, connecting their actions to a chain of supply and demand. When The Church also own shares in Wally's and Kandy Kakes, the financial benefits they receive from this increased demand outweighs the comparably small-scale loss of in-store items that contribute towards it. Their theft extends the veal-related thefts Wally's absorbs, furthering their marketability by infiltrating anti-capitalist symbolism, complicating the distinction between systemic and subversive consumption.

The Church infiltrates consumer society in an attempt to destroy it from within like Project Mayhem, but through financial investment rather than commodity production. While Project Mayhem aims to destroy the financial sector to reset both debt and wealth to zero, The Church invests in stocks and shares, subverting consumption in a related but distinct way. Project Mayhem's destruction apparently contrasts The Church's investment, but they remain connected through an underlying collective and constructive investment in capital that makes them contradictory. The symbolism of each organisation – the destruction and purification of soap; the inescapable biological

[587] Ibid., p. 209.
[588] Ibid., p. 132.

process of food consumption – suggest discrete sets of aims differentiated by their definition of transformation. Yet, they share an inability to imagine construction outside capitalism – Project Mayhem can only conceive a purifying destruction, and The Church a subversive recalibration of an inescapable system. In each instance, the organisations cannot isolate themselves from advanced capitalism's processes, perpetuating their ineffectiveness as unsustainable and contradictory movements that cannot attain the radical transformation they desire.

The anxieties produced by an inability to achieve radical transformation in Kleeman's novel are central to its repetition of postmodernism. Despite being published almost twenty years after *Fight Club*, *You Too*'s depiction of consumer capitalism remains largely unchanged, suggesting a specific function of this apparently uncritical repetition. Instead of a nostalgic celebration of nineties American postmodernism, Kleeman offers a repetition that strips away superficial distinctions that might otherwise obscure the apparent similarities of their consumption-driven advanced capitalist societies. The absence of digital technology initially distinguishes it from *Taipei*, but advances a comparable aim: the politicisation of the reductive repetition of postmodernism. If, as the novel suggests, even successful construction results in commodification, postmodern cynicism towards radical transformation combined with failed and inadequate forms of subversion is all that remains. This is seemingly the central insight of the novel, illustrated on the few occasions any remote form of coherence is achieved. Michael's resistance gives a coherent image to an undesirable product, meaning, as the protagonist states, 'Veal had a face now, where before it had nothing.'[589] His theft becomes a reason to consume, making his subversive act of destruction a constructive strategy of capitalism. Comparably, constructively imagined futures remain fragmented and isolated at the end of the text. The protagonist describes Chris, a store attendant, as appearing distant 'because we were imagining different things for our future,' undermining the transformative potential of this coherence.[590] Here, constructive possibilities are personal and isolating, rather than collective and connecting, becoming simply another problematic form of escapism. The protagonist

[589] Ibid., p. 178.
[590] Ibid., p. 282.

suggests one needs ‘a vision of the future in order to get anywhere,’ but this vision simply feeds into the limits of radical transformation that repeat the anxieties of postmodernism central to this thesis.[591] The novel’s characters subsequently remain caught between escapism as failed avoidance and an implied fatalist impossibility of escape. This entrapment produces a tension which is central to the novel’s repetition of postmodernism through perpetual hopelessness.

Conclusion

Taipei and *You Too* politicise their repetition of postmodernism, dramatising a cynicism that initially appears nostalgic, reinforced through their partial return to interiority. However, instead of desiring a return to nineties postmodernism, they outline a continuum that suggests this period has not been succeeded. The inferred progression of revitalised repetition or of digital culture is removed from Lin and Kleeman’s refusal to update or notably alter postmodernism in these texts. Although a need to recontextualise or surpass the techniques of postmodernism are understandable and even necessary aims, the emphasis this places upon the new – however limited this newness might be – is counterbalanced in these novels. Here, references to nineties America – from literature to music – are repeated, foregrounding their continued ability to articulate the hopelessness of a never-ending present produced by the totalising force of advanced capitalism. It would be problematic to completely ignore the cultural shifts presented by theories of the post-postmodern, the digital revolution and the re-starting of history. *Taipei* and *You Too* are at odds with this desire to leave behind postmodernism, considering instead how the continuation of advanced capitalism extends postmodernism’s relevance into twenty-first century American culture. In these novels, postmodernism’s contradictions and cynicism provide a way of navigating a cultural dislocation that continues under twenty-first century capitalism. Paradoxically, postmodernism is given a contemporary cultural currency by dramatising a repetition of the same, emphasising the continued relevance of postmodern authors, texts and ideas through forms of jarring dislocation. In the absence of radical transformation, if all that

[591] Ibid., p. 281.

can be done is acknowledge the specificities of non-epochal change, locating the points of transformation within this extended legacy, this point is intensified in *Taipei* and *You Too*. By considering societal problems without seeking an answer, postmodernism provides a way of confronting these contradictions that is central to the novels' depictions of advanced capitalism.

Taipei and *You Too* locate postmodernism's anxieties within twenty-first century culture, repeating them largely unchanged to emphasise the prescience of postmodern descriptions of commodified rebellion. Their use of canonical examples of American literary postmodernism at times ignores or oversimplifies the cultural shifts brought about by digital technology. However, this provides a repetition that dramatises the absence of radical transformation by also removing much of the examples of non-epochal change that usually mask this continuum. The postmodern déjà vu Virno describes, where advanced capitalism prevents any real sense of cultural transformation, is central to these novels' depictions of a capitalist framework defined by postmodern hopelessness. Like in Virno's theory of déjà vu, the content of the novels at times deviates from the conventions of the postmodern influences they draw upon, but the form is repeated unchanged. This repetition produces a jarring effect that methodologically repeats the eternal present the novels also depict.

Taipei and *You Too*'s unconventional depictions of twenty-first century culture refuses to consider it as either a successor to postmodernism, or a means of undermining capitalism. If globalisation and digital technology have intensified the impossibility of imagining an outside capitalism, then *Taipei* and *You Too* locate this within the cynical vocabulary of postmodernism. When minor transformations, rooted in localised cultural shifts, replace more widespread epochal change, the legacy of postmodernism is not succeeded but reconsidered. Instead of necessarily being viewed as an inescapable epoch, or an epoch to specifically be surpassed, it can also be considered as an approach that articulates a relationship to the inescapable epoch of advanced capitalism. In *Taipei* and *You Too*, cultural superficiality, isolation and consumerism are intensified by the novels' repetition of postmodernism, making this repetition an approach that compliments other conceptualisations of this intensification as a form of post-postmodernism. Lin and Kleeman's repetition of postmodernism

reframes the capitalist deadlock contained within theories of post-postmodernism and ‘after’ postmodernism, foregrounding this continuum through their dramatisation of repetition.

Conclusion

Via a series of revisions and remouldings, postmodernism can be seen to be an active aesthetic mode within the contemporary period. The texts discussed demarcate some of the forms these repetitions can take, illustrating the continued legacy of postmodernism today. An oversimplification of postmodernism marginalises its contemporary relevance and prioritises succession over its contemporary repetitions. In contrast, to consider repetitions of postmodernism stages an original intervention that foregrounds its continued aesthetic vitality. The broad cross-section of experimental American fiction in the preceding chapters demonstrates postmodernism's complexity and diversity. I argue this continued use of postmodern aesthetics is part of a continuum that persists within twenty-first century American culture. Postmodernism's chaotic realism is used to aesthetically confront the complexity and contradictions of advanced capitalism's unsurpassable dominance. The novels analysed display a self-reflexive use of postmodernism, repeating and altering postmodernism's aesthetics in ways that foregrounds its contemporary recurrence.

This continuation of postmodern aesthetics within American fiction, and its sustained ability to present a range of contemporary issues, emphasises a persistent relevance in two significant ways. Firstly, postmodern literary aesthetics become culturally integrated and repeated in the socio-political landscape of contemporary American culture. Secondly, postmodern aesthetics are repeated within American fiction to confront the complex reality of the contemporary moment. This continued ability to consider the present through postmodern aesthetics suggests a persistent relevance of its extreme, disorientating, and contradictory tropes of literary experimentation. Postmodern aesthetics continue to provide vital ways of confronting the intensified entwinement of advanced capitalism and the continuing postmodern cultural epoch. The collection of American texts discussed here cannot be easily described as part of a coherent movement, but evidence a postmodern continuum that persists in twenty-first century America. The establishment of this twenty-first century postmodern continuum, evidenced through analyses of American fiction, provides an original way of understanding postmodernism's connection to contemporary American culture.

Scholarship on American fiction prioritises a succession from postmodernism, rather than explicitly reflecting upon its twenty-first century repetitions. For James Annesley, the historical context of postmodernism means its application to twenty-first century fiction would be 'forced to broaden and extend this perspective to the point that it loses its specificity.'[592] Yet, his dismissal of postmodernism's ambiguity does not disregard the continued relevance of postmodern texts in the succeeding decades (from twentieth century blank fiction to his reading of *Fight Club* within a twenty-first century context of globalised fictions). To consider repetitions of postmodern aesthetics accounts for this contradictory historicisation of postmodernism, while canonical postmodern texts continue to be used in contemporary literary scholarship. The linguistic turn away from the term postmodernism in scholarly analyses of postmodern texts is exemplified by aggression for Kathryn Hume, the extreme for Naomi Mandel, and a process of refusal or underwriting for Georgina Colby.[593] These examples illustrate the ways postmodernism persists in contemporary literary criticism, but within different methodological approaches, and under different terms, comparable to the theorisations of an 'after' postmodernism. Graham Matthews argues for a reappraisal of the contemporary moment, in light of 'the continued expansion of post-modern aesthetics into all aspects of everyday life.' [594] However, in contrast to Matthews' claim that 'the political efficiency of postmodern approaches to art and literature is in decline,' this postmodern continuum accounts for a shifting relation to postmodernism that partly emphasises its continued vitality.[595]

By prioritising repetition over succession, this postmodern continuum provides an alternative way of understanding the complex legacy of postmodernism from a contemporary perspective. Theories of an 'after' postmodernism prioritise an awkward succession over repetition, despite inferring the continued relevance of postmodernism. Their attempts to account for the contemporary moment through alternative concepts

[592] Annesley, *Fictions of Globalization*, p. 9.
[593] Hume, *Aggressive Fictions*, p. xii; Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel, 'Introduction', in *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme*, ed. by Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel (London & New York: Continuum, 2006), pp. 1-5, (p. 1); Colby, *Bret Easton Ellis*, p. 1.
[594] Graham Matthews, *Ethics of Desire in the Wake of Postmodernism: Contemporary Satire* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 2.
[595] Ibid.

and terminology overstates a distinction from postmodernism. Gilles Lipovestky makes postmodernism a passing 'transitional stage' in a cultural shift towards digital technology, suggesting an incongruity with the contemporary moment.[596] To a lesser extent, this is also true of Jeffrey Nealon's post-postmodernism, which produces an 'intensification and mutation within postmodernism' that 'becomes something recognizably different in its contours and workings.'[597] An analysis of postmodern repetitions accounts for alterations but does not presuppose succession from a postmodern cultural epoch, offering an alternative way of contextualising postmodern aesthetics in American fiction. The twenty-first century repetitions of postmodernism interrogated here explicitly address an understated persistence in both literary criticism and contemporary theory. By illustrating the continuation of postmodernism's anxieties and techniques in twenty-first century America, the analysed texts bridge a gap between the late eighties and the present moment found in literary and cultural scholarship.

The contemporary repetition – or continuum – of postmodernism reappraises its legacy, arguing for an aesthetic vitality that is frequently marginalised in literary scholarship. An analysis of these contemporary repetitions reconsiders the complexities of postmodernism's aesthetics, and the way this connection shapes an understanding of the American political landscape. This project builds upon Mary Holland's description of a contemporary 'hyperperiodization,' where the desire to conceptualise a succession from postmodernism paradoxically illustrates its 'belated success.'[598] Holland's claim defines a changing cultural relation to postmodernism, shaped by a desire for succession that repeats a postmodern plurality and absence of alternative grand narratives. My analysis of a postmodern continuum, connected to American fiction, develops Holland's desire to assess the contemporary moment as an extension of postmodernism. Here, repetition provides a distinct methodological approach that sheds new light on this contemporary cultural integration. An analysis of postmodern aesthetics facilitates a new way of understanding how contemporary American culture internalises, recalibrates, and extends postmodernism's legacy into the new millennium.

[596] Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*, p. 35.
[597] Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism*, p. ix.
[598] Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism*, pp. 1, 17.

The establishment of this postmodern continuum recognises postmodernism as a mobile set of practices that remain in flux, connecting its cultural integration to the perpetuation of postmodern aesthetics within American fiction. This connection presents an ignored aspect of postmodern vitality, where an analysis of postmodern aesthetics provides new ways of articulating a changing cultural relation to postmodernism.

Postmodernism's influence can be traced in ways that emphasise an extended legacy through repetition that reconnects it to the present moment, rather than seeking to succeed it. The extreme depictions of subjective and collective failures to break away from advanced capitalism in Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* are central to postmodernism's continued vitality. Advanced capitalism's intensification since the collapse of Soviet communism extends into twenty-first century American culture, where altered repetitions of postmodernism's aesthetics represent this prolonged epochal experience. Amanda Filipacchi's *Love Creeps*, Zané Sachs' *Sadie: The Sadist*, Dennis Cooper's *God Jr.* and *Zac's Control Panel*, Tao Lin's *Taipei* and Alexandra Kleeman's *You Too Can Have A Body Like Mine* exemplify the diverse ways postmodernism's aesthetic value is repeated, extended, and altered in contemporary American writing. These contemporary works demonstrate how postmodern techniques provide vital ways of confronting the cultural shifts used to justify a succession from postmodernism. Collectively, these novels present a postmodern continuum within contemporary American culture. This continuum demonstrates new ways of understanding the points of connection between postmodernism and the twenty-first century, advancing the relevance of postmodernism within contemporary literary scholarship.

The continued vitality of postmodern aesthetics provides a distinct way of mapping the complex reality of contemporary American culture. By confronting the complex ways postmodernism has been repeated and altered, a more precise analysis of how postmodernism aesthetically continues is offered. This establishment of a postmodern continuum contributes a new way of considering what it means to be 'after' (the height of) postmodernism, emphasising differences within postmodernism rather than the construction of a new epoch. The repetition of postmodernism partly provides a meaningful way of reflecting upon the continued dominance of advanced capitalism, a

central element of the majority of the texts discussed here. In the canonical postmodern texts analysed – *American Psycho*, *Empire of the Senseless*, and *Fight Club* – advanced capitalism's dominance is depicted through an inability to escape, either subjectively or collectively. This is represented through the commodification of Bateman's schizophrenic hallucinations, the revolutionary failures Abhor recounts, and Project Mayhem's inability to destroy the financial sector. The totalising force of commodification and consumer culture is central to the other contemporary novels (*Love Creeps*, *Sadie*, *Taipei*, and *You Too*), with the exception of Cooper's work. Yet, in all of the works discussed here, postmodernism represents a problematic that shapes the limits of cultural succession. In various ways, postmodern aesthetics allegorise an awkward experience of cultural succession shaped by failure and repetition. The inability to succeed advanced capitalism underpins the continued vitality of postmodern aesthetics, as they are adapted to depict the contradictions and complexities of contemporary American culture.

The novels discussed in the preceding chapters illustrate how postmodern aesthetics provide ways of articulating this cultural integration through contemporary repetitions of postmodernism. Patrick Bateman's excessive violent desire in *American Psycho* disrupts a distinction between revolutionary change and systemic validation, which is repeated in accelerationist theory and the political rise of Trump. The failure to break away from an entrenched capitalist framework through outlaw communities in *Empire of the Senseless* and *Fight Club* echoes a post-Cold War intensification of capitalism that post-postmodern theories frequently articulate. This closure of a 'beyond' advanced capitalism depicted in these novels shapes a contemporary cultural experience disillusioned by this enclosure, which postmodern aesthetics continue to articulate. The external limits placed upon an excess of desire in *Love Creeps* and *Sadie* prioritise subversion over escape, replacing productive desire and collective efficiency with unproductive waste. Their adaption of postmodern aesthetics locates this experience of failure within a post-transgressive and post-2008 cultural context where even subversion is complicated, revitalising these tropes through their remoulded use of them. The counter-intuitive repetition of postmodernism in *God Jr.* and *Zac's Control Panel* complicates attempts to reduce postmodern aesthetics to an exhausted avant-

garde style that can be surpassed. Instead, Cooper's failure to achieve a clean break from postmodern aesthetics of ambiguity, fragmentation, pastiche, and hyperreality suggest a cultural integration within digital culture that extends postmodernism's cultural relevance. *Taipei* and *You Too*'s apparently uncritical repetition of postmodern aesthetics confronts the hopelessness of transforming advanced capitalism, where repetition provides a politicised commentary on absent alternative systems. Their dramatised repetition of postmodern aesthetics emphasises a distinction between superficial cultural change and radical transformation, presenting a postmodern continuum that persists within twenty-first century America.

The repetition of postmodern aesthetics in contemporary American fiction sheds new light on how these tropes are mobilised to confront changes within this postmodern continuum. Postmodern aesthetics of excess, destabilisation, fragmentation, pastiche, and hopeless disillusionment are repeated in the aesthetics of experimental twenty-first century American fiction. My interrogation of postmodern repetitions stages an intervention that sheds new light on postmodernism's presence within the contemporary moment. This approach traces a connection between apparently discrete experiences – digital culture, or the post-2008 cultural climate, for example – that are collectively presented here as extensions of postmodern aesthetics. In this context, repetition foregrounds an understated extension of postmodernism within contemporary American writing, presenting a distinct articulation of this connection without obscuring the persistent presence of postmodernism. The prioritisation of postmodern repetitions, rather than a succession into post-postmodernism, offers an original way of understanding the continuation of postmodern aesthetics within an American context. This postmodern continuum interrogates these cultural shifts as changes within a postmodern cultural epoch, providing a counter-narrative to attempts to succeed postmodernism by restating its contemporary relevance. An analysis of postmodern aesthetics and their repetition confront this changing relation to postmodernism within contemporary America, producing a new way of understanding how its vitality persists.

The establishment of a postmodern continuum does not provide an overarching explanation of contemporary American writing. Instead, it offers insights into the ways postmodernism's aesthetics are mobilised today to question its perceived irrelevance.

These postmodern repetitions foreground the ways postmodern aesthetics have been adapted to confront a distinctly twenty-first century cultural experience, providing an original way of considering postmodernism's contemporary cultural currency. This postmodern continuum articulates a discontent repeated in the contemporary moment through awkward forms of succession. In a period where postmodernism's relevance can easily be minimised or overlooked, it remains central to discussions of globalised capitalism, digital culture, and attempts to position an 'after' postmodernism. What persists of postmodernism in the contemporary moment is, largely, its cynicism towards radical transformation and the construction of new grand narratives. This postmodern cynicism articulates the complexities, contradictions, and failures that shape the relation to advanced capitalism and postmodern aesthetics analysed in the preceding chapters.

Where there has been a tendency to conceptualise a period 'after' postmodernism academically, at times this has been at the expense of fully acknowledging the complexities of postmodernism's continued repetition. Comparably, attempts to define new periods of capitalism seemingly repeat a postmodern absence of exteriority, emphasising the totalising dominance of globalised capitalism. Even the digital turn within culture and theory, frequently used as a point of distinction from postmodernism, intensifies rather than succeeds its insights. In some paradoxical sense, this makes postmodernism more integral to the contemporary moment than at its height, as its insights become more commonplace. Instead of remaining an avant-garde style or academic set of methodological and theoretical practices, postmodernism's impact has been extended through its cultural integration. This process typifies its continued but altered presence, a point that is at times obscured by a desire to succeed rather than confront this legacy as a form of repetition. To consider forms of postmodern repetition in contemporary culture alters the way the present is perceived, emphasising the continuation of postmodernism's features, rather than resigning it to history.

To consider the present moment as postmodern poses a provocative point of reflection. It directly confronts a legacy that is both significant and lasting, foregrounding a complexity that makes it continually prescient but in unexpected ways. It poses the challenge of historicisation within postmodernism, of utilising this process of transition,

but to face the deadlock posed by the absence of radical transformation. Instead of prematurely conceptualising an 'after' postmodernism, this experience deserves greater care and attention to fully appreciate the nuanced complexities that produce repetitions of postmodernism. If the present moment is shaped by a collective desire for radical epochal change that either cannot be imagined or cannot be achieved, postmodernism continues to provide a way of articulating this. This project's original contribution to knowledge stems from considering how postmodern aesthetics continue to articulate the complex reality within a twenty-first century postmodern cultural epoch.

Postmodernism may no longer be in vogue, but its lasting legacy is exemplified by twenty-first century American culture. What may have seemed surreal or textually experimental in postmodernism's chaotic realism has been partly integrated into the American cultural consciousness. This can be seen in the proliferation of online conspiracies that collapse the distinction between facts and opinions, resulting in the unusually postmodern incarnation of post-truth. The collapse of high and low culture is also exemplified by not only the possibility of Trump's second term in office, but also by Kanye West's proposed run for presidency. Although the continued rioting in response to police violence and systemic racism suggests a dissatisfaction and desire for radical transformation, it is too early to say if this will be achieved. This period marked by the end of the Cold War and the transition into the new millennium presents a changing relation to postmodernism, but one where its significance has morphed rather than dissipated. The various cultural changes – from the expansion of advanced capitalism to the advent of the Digital Revolution – build from and repeat features of postmodernism without yet producing epochal transformation. For this reason, I argue American culture remains within a postmodern epoch that has altered to account for these cultural changes, but which has not been succeeded.

An assessment of canonical postmodern American authors within the contemporary moment makes an original contribution to literary criticism. *American Psycho*'s unreliable narration and extreme violence exemplify its postmodern aesthetics. These features are repeated in the contemporary American political landscape, beyond the novel's numerous references to Trump. Bateman's hallucinatory rage, which collapses the distinction between his reality and imagination, taps into the

post-truth destabilisation of the facts/fiction divide. The ambiguity created by postmodernism's collapse of objectivity – and therefore 'truth' hierarchies – is dramatised by Bateman, repeating postmodern insights in different contextual settings. His hallucinatory violence, described here through Deleuzo-Guattarian desire, presents an extreme logical conclusion of consumer capitalist mechanisms that is articulated in contemporary theory. For Nealon, this is an 'intensification' of postmodernism and advanced capitalism that produces post-postmodernism.[599] Nick Land's description of capital as 'a social suicide machine' similarly reflects an intensification he theorises through accelerationism.[600] Although both Nealon and Land focus upon either a succession from postmodernism or a rejection of its 'quaintly humanist' framework, the escalating intensity resonates with the postmodern aesthetics depicted in Ellis' novel.[601] Bateman personifies an intensification of capitalism that repeats and adapts postmodern aesthetics, illustrating an extension of this postmodern continuum.

This intensification of advanced capitalism is also central to *Empire of the Senseless* and *Fight Club*, but through collective rather than subjective violence. The quest for affirmative forms of creative nihilism in both novels relocates the accelerationism of *American Psycho* on a collective rather than simply subjective level. The combination of failure, disillusionment, violence and nihilistic destruction integral to their postmodern aesthetics is repeated in the contemporary discontent of American society. *Empire of the Senseless* and *Fight Club* both recount populist cooperative movements that attempt to destabilise capitalist society, constructed from the radicalised boredom of Abhor and Tyler Durden/the Narrator's rejection of consumer society. The novels' dissatisfactions extend from an inability to break from a globalised advanced capitalism in a post-Cold War climate. This discontent escalating into collective violence is repeated in contemporary American culture, from the rise of the alt-right to the recent Black Lives Matter protests. Unlike the Parisian rebels and Project Mayhem, these contemporary movements do not prioritise violence as explicitly purifying. Yet, they continue to respond to an enclosed and inescapable advanced

[599] Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism*, p. ix.
[600] Land, 'Making it With Death', p. 265.
[601] Land, 'Meltdown', p. 453.

capitalist system through violent unrest. This inability to – even violently – break from systemic capitalism repeats the postmodern aesthetics of disillusionment and failure found in *Empire of the Senseless* and *Fight Club*.

Postmodernism's violent aesthetics resonates with critiques of the status quos of American society. From the provocations of Milo Yiannopoulos to Trump's ascension to power, the outsider figure of America's Frontier Myth and post-sixties counterculture have intertwined in what Matthew McManus calls 'Post-modern conservatism.'[602] This represents what McManus calls, 'a form of identity politics that emerges as a reaction against post-modern culture, while remaining very much its product.'[603] Post-modern conservatism is therefore indebted to a cultural integration of postmodernism, repeating the aesthetics of provocation and outsider individualism found in *Empire of the Senseless*, *American Psycho*, and *Fight Club*. This is reinforced by the 'ease with which this broader alt-right and alt-light milieu can use transgressive styles today' that Angela Nagle describes.[604] The collapse of clear-cut boundaries central to postmodern aesthetics is intensified through its repetition within the right-wing political sphere. These postmodern aesthetics of extreme violence, previously associated with left-wing counterculture, reconnect *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* to the contemporary moment via right-wing politics.[605] This recalibration of countercultural aesthetics to include the political right illustrates the adaptability of postmodernism, and how this diversifies its repetitions in contemporary American culture. The American quest for liberty and the pursuit of happiness connects to postmodern anxieties, aesthetics and methodologies that are repeated and altered within contemporary American society.

To consider the repetitions of postmodernism confronts the ways it is perpetuated in American fiction and culture, but overlooked in contemporary criticism. This intervention between postmodernism and contemporary America provides a new way of understanding how postmodern aesthetics have been adapted and repeated. It builds upon sociological and theoretical reflections upon postmodernism's contemporary recurrence, focusing specifically on close readings of American texts that makes an

[602] McManus, 'What Is Post-Modern Conservatism?', p. 42.
[603] Ibid.
[604] Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, p. 29.
[605] Ibid.

original contribution from the discipline of literary criticism. The persistence of postmodern aesthetics in American culture is exemplified by the choice of texts in this analysis of a postmodern continuum, spanning the years of 1988 to 2015. When the legacy of American postmodern fiction stretches back to William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (1959), it is difficult to argue its presence has been short lived. Postmodernism's alterations and repetitions indicate periods of transition within a postmodern cultural epoch, which shape the way its aesthetic practices are used. This project's original contribution to knowledge extends from its critical reflection upon shifts within postmodernism. Fundamentally, it emphasises how postmodernism's malleability is mobilised to respond to distinct cultural moments in American history. Postmodernism's emphasis upon disillusionment, combined with an absence of radical transformation, is easily appropriated to articulate a range of twenty-first century concerns. Mark Fisher's claim that post-Cold War capitalism is now 'the only game in town' reiterates the lasting legacy of postmodernism within the contemporary moment.[606] Advanced capitalism provides a grand narrative that seemingly challenges a postmodern world view. Yet, the perpetual failure to imagine a way out of this stage of capitalism essentially realises postmodernism's cynicism towards radical transformation. Therefore, postmodernism's political relevance persists, though not necessarily in the most obvious way.

To dismiss the contemporaneity of postmodernism marginalises its intensification within a globalised capitalist framework since the end of the Cold War. Postmodern aesthetics are mobilised in a range of critically ignored contemporary American works. Repetitions of postmodernism can be found in a collection of contemporary writers discussed here – Amanda Filipacchi, Zané Sachs, Tao Lin and Alexandra Kleeman – who have received little or no critical attention. This project sheds new light on these works through an analysis of this postmodern continuum. Their use of postmodern aesthetics locates these features within the concerns of the historical moment they are repeated in, depicting shifts within a persisting postmodern continuum. To consider the repetitions of postmodernism provides a specificity that responds to Annesley's critique of postmodernism's ambiguity, while also illustrating how it continues to articulate contemporary American cultural concerns. Postmodernism's persistence derives from

[606] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 15.

its malleability rather than ambiguity, where repetition provides a way of considering its continuity, rather than presenting these alterations as forms of succession. To interrogate these repetitions of postmodern aesthetics demonstrates the complexities of postmodernism's extended legacy within the contemporary moment.

Love Creeps and *Sadie*'s use of transgression provides a further way extreme postmodern aesthetics are repeated in American fiction, counter to the political right's mobilisation of transgression. The novels draw upon waste and limitation to depict economically unproductive excesses of sexual desire, contrasting the machinic productivity of Bateman's deregulated excesses. They extend the shift of postmodern aesthetics from subjectivity to external collectives, connected particularly to *Fight Club*. A subjective or collective excess of desire is represented as subversive in *Love Creeps*, rather than as a means of escaping an advanced capitalist framework. *Sadie* extends this further, locating the potential transformation of advanced capitalism in ecological concerns, making transformation an environmentally external feature that shapes subjective experience. By internalising the subjective and collective failures to achieve this break, *Love Creeps* and *Sadie* prioritise subversion over the attempts to escape advanced capitalism depicted in *American Psycho*, *Empire of the Senseless*, and *Fight Club*. Filipacchi and Sachs' use of postmodern aesthetics therefore repeat and alter these tropes, internalising and applying their insights to twenty-first century American culture. The representations of subversion – via an excess of desire – also differs between Filipacchi and Sachs' novels, published before and after the 2008 financial crisis. This distinct use of postmodern aesthetics further reinforces how they are repeated and distinguished by discrete historical events that reshape their use. Their adaptation of these literary tropes illustrates how they continue to be mobilised to depict the complex reality of contemporary America in distinct yet related ways. *Love Creeps* and *Sadie* extend a contemporary revitalisation of postmodern aesthetics of transgression within fiction, expressing contemporary concerns through their adaptation, rather than applying these aesthetic provocations to socio-political practice.

The partial institutionalisation of postmodernism presents a form of repetition central to its recurrence within twenty-first century American culture. For Rosi Braidotti, attempts to use postmodern definitions of the contemporary moment is 'intellectually

lazy,' but arguably this is only if it fails to account for cultural shifts that alter an understanding of its contemporary manifestations.[607] Postmodernism's malleability is integral to understanding its complex legacy, accounting for its contemporary repetitions, which combine a vitality through appropriation with a cultural acceptance and integration of its previously radical ideas. This produces a cultural climate where intersectionality sits alongside the Blue Lives Matter movement; where the collapse of high and low culture produces critical theorists like Slavoj Žižek, but also presidents like Trump. A contemporary understanding of postmodernism must consider its cultural integration and the continued use of its aesthetics to fully account for the complexities of its contemporary repetition. To focus on these repetitions responds to the contemporary attempts to theoretically define an 'after' postmodernism, producing a new way of articulating the contemporary presence of postmodern aesthetics within American culture. The combined appropriation and integration of postmodernism presents a legacy based upon repetition, but one which is partly hidden by the cultural shifts that overlay its continued use.

This attempt to account for shifts within a postmodern continuum through repetition reconsiders scholarship on postmodernism and transition between historical moments. Fredric Jameson's claim postmodernism may 'be little more than a transitional period between two stages of capitalism' articulates the shifts within postmodernism that must be scrutinised.[608] Yet, if this 'process of being restructured on a global scale' is far from over, this transition that intertwines advanced capitalism and postmodernism persists in the contemporary moment.[609] After the Cold War, the geographical expansion of advanced capitalism presents a cultural shift within a postmodern continuum that extends into the twenty-first century. The intensification of an inescapable capitalist framework internalises the anxieties of postmodernism, where the repetition of postmodern aesthetics continues to confront this complex and contradictory reality. This interpretation of transition stands in contrast to Lipovetsky's description of

[607] Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, p. 114.
[608] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 417.
[609] Ibid.

postmodernism as a brief 'transitional stage' from modernism to hypermodernism[610] It is also distinct from Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen's description of a twenty-first century 'transitional period' from postmodernism into metamodernism.[611] In both of these instances postmodernism is located in the past, presenting a transition from rather than within postmodernism. An analysis of the repetitions of postmodernism, emphasising its altered extension into contemporary American fiction, produces an original and distinct reading of postmodernism and the contemporary moment. This reading of postmodern repetitions partly returns to the transition Jameson articulates, considering how a changing relation to postmodernism is culturally integrated in a way that informs the use of postmodern aesthetics.

The cultural integration of postmodernism does not necessarily mean it is simply outdated. However, postmodernism's aesthetic ability to articulate the discontents of twenty-first century America is distinct from the authors connected to postmodernism. Ellis' controversial social media presence, Cooper's limited engagement with digital technology, and the post-humous studies on Acker emphasise a historical component that connects it to the past. Cooper's claims digital technology, specifically his online blog, 'can be almost anything' because of its 'very limited form' overstates the potential of his rudimentary use of digital technology.[612] By comparison, Ellis' cultural commentary includes a dislike of cancel culture and 'the cult of vicitmization,' a self-confessed 'moral ambivalence about politics,' and his sympathetic view of Donald Trump's ascension as 'another form of *resistance*.'[613] Both authors illustrate attempts to remain culturally relevant – via technology and provocation – that for various reasons seem out of step with contemporary American culture. Yet, their misunderstandings emphasise a further way postmodernism's aesthetics are repeated, specifically through a cultural integration that shifts the focus of its aesthetic relevance.

Cooper's apparently counter-intuitive repetition of postmodernism illustrates the contradictory ways its aesthetics persist in contemporary American works. His attempts to surpass postmodern aesthetics fail because he reduces it to a style of artistic

[610] Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*, p. 35.
[611] Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen, *Metamodernism*, p. 12.
[612] Kennedy, 'It's the shift that creates', p. 199.
[613] Ellis, *White*, pp. 15, 147, 141.

experimentation, rather than also accounting for its cultural integration. This distinguishes *God Jr.* and *Zac's Control Panel*'s relation to postmodernism from *Love Creeps* and *Sadie*, which more successfully revitalise transgressive tropes. By contrast, Cooper's limited grasp upon both digital technology and postmodernism's cultural integration emphasises the adaptability of postmodernism. His integration of video games and GIFs illustrates the need to consider postmodernism's complex combination of artistic aesthetics and cultural practices. Cooper's repetition of established artistic approaches and theories occurs through the destabilisation of chronology, abstraction of language, and his depiction of hyperreality. Instead of these features making his work distinctly innovative in a way that succeeds postmodernism, they emphasise the need to unpack the various ways postmodernism is culturally integrated and repeated to better understand its contemporary relevance. Cooper's work presents a repetition distinct from Filipacchi and Sachs' novels, emphasising his inability to succeed postmodernism, rather than his willing repetition of it.

Postmodernism's cultural integration presents an altered and repeated relevance, rather than suggesting the arrival of a new epoch. The insights of postmodernism are repeated in contemporary academic practices, from interdisciplinary liberal arts programmes to fourth wave intersectional trans-feminist writers like Andrea Long Chu. The continued academic interest in Gilles Deleuze (and Félix Guattari) also informs contemporary scholarship on accelerationism, posthumanism, affect theory, and Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's work. Michel Foucault's claim that 'perhaps one day, this century will be known as Deleuzian' has seemingly been realised within the realms of twenty-first century academic theory.[614] The schizophrenic process, focusing upon the fragmentation of subjectivity, is distinguished from the linguistic turn that shaped many recognisably postmodern works – exemplified by Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan. This suggests a distinction from postmodernism reiterated by Guattari's claim that 'postmodernism is nothing but the last gasp of modernism.'[615] Yet, the schizophrenic

[614] Michel Foucault, 'Theatrum Philosophicum', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. by Donald F. Bouchard, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 165-196, (p. 165).
[615] Félix Guattari, 'The Postmodern Impasse', in *The Guattari Reader*, ed. by Gary Genosko (Oxford & Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), pp. 109-113, (p. 109).

process' fragmentation and deregulated desire is repeated in the mechanisms of advanced capitalism and digital culture. Beyond their interest in Burroughs' fragmentary expressions of desire in fiction, the schizophrenic process is repeated in a number of more contemporary works of American postmodern fiction. From its personification in *American Psycho* and *Sadie*, to the digital fragmentation of *Zac's Control Panel*, Deleuzo-Guattarian theory resonates with the concerns depicted through the complex realism of the texts discussed here. A turn towards these theoretical approaches repeats and is repeated by contemporary incarnations of postmodernism, suggesting a contemporary shift within American postmodernism that is commonly reduced to a succession from postmodernism. This project's analysis of postmodern repetitions produces a new way of understanding this connection between postmodernism and the contemporary moment, via continuation rather than succession. The transitions within a postmodern continuum demonstrate a continued cultural vibrancy, where postmodern aesthetics are repeated and remoulded to express distinctly twenty-first century concerns. If postmodernism has in some ways been surpassed, perhaps this is only the previously understood incarnation(s) of it, making the repetitions analysed here indicative of a continued process of transition.

By emphasising what remains current about postmodernism through repetition, its contemporary critical and cultural currency can be better understood. This process of repetition is dramatised in *Taipei* and *You Too*, politicising what initially appears to be nostalgia for a lost era of postmodernism. Their largely unchanged relocation of postmodern aesthetics within a twenty-first century context destabilises a contemporary cultural distinction from postmodernism. In *Taipei*, this is depicted through a hedonistic apathy reminiscent of Ellis' early work, particularly *Less Than Zero* and *American Psycho*, resituated within a digital cultural landscape. By contrast, digital technology is largely absent from *You Too*, giving it an aesthetic quality comparable to *Fight Club*, a novel that Kleeman's critique of consumer culture through failed outsider collectives heavily draws upon. The apparent reductivity of the texts' repetition of postmodernism becomes a political act that could be described as purposeful rather than naïve. Their repetition of postmodernism produces a jarring displacement, presenting the features used to distinguish the contemporary from postmodernism as superficial changes.

This change within a postmodern continuum is distinguished from more radical transformation that might succeed advanced capitalism and the current postmodern continuum. The contemporary gap between traditional leftist class analysis and identity politics emphasise a schism within the political left, perpetuating an absence of constructive alternatives integral to both postmodernism and *You Too*. Comparably, the fragmented fluidity of digital culture of *Taipei*, collapsing the distinction between the physical and virtual reality, attests to the integration of postmodernism within contemporary American culture. *Taipei* and *You Too* do not rework postmodern aesthetics to revitalise them, nor do they counter-intuitively repeat postmodern features in an attempt to surpass them. Instead, these novels dramatise a repetition reliant upon a dislocation of time, repeating postmodern features within the present moment. When considered alongside the other texts discussed, Lin and Kleeman's texts provide a new understanding of postmodernism's continued legacy through the contemporary repetition of its aesthetics.

The combined integration of postmodernism into the American subconscious and its recurrence in fiction collectively illustrates its persistent and repeated relevance. The publication of the *Fight Club 2* and *Fight Club 3* comic book collections, and the internationally successful *American Psycho* the musical, emphasise postmodernism's repetition within different artistic mediums. A range of American authors concurrent to the canonical postmodern writers discussed here also contribute towards the various ways postmodernism's legacy is extended and repeated. The continued publication of works by internationally recognised authors – such as Steve Erickson, Don DeLillo, and Lynn Tillman – exemplify this persistence through writers established during the height of American postmodernism. This relevance is furthered by a cross-section of contemporary American authors adopting and repeating postmodernism, specifically the transgressive elements of Chad Kultgen, Jerry Stahl, and Supervert. Although postmodern aesthetics may not be consistently and overtly prevalent in contemporary American writing, they continue to provide valuable ways of reflecting on the contemporary moment. The apparent marginality of postmodernism arises from the recalibrated relation to it in contemporary American society, where the cultural internalisation is central to the shifting relevance of postmodernism. Instead of being the

dominant style, as it was for Jameson, postmodernism continues in more subtle and indirect ways that permeate contemporary American culture and fiction. From *American Psycho* to *You Too*, focusing on the repetitions of postmodernism emphasises a continued relevance that is partly lost in attempts to define an 'after' postmodernism. By considering this diverse and changing influence as a process of repetition within a postmodern continuum, specifically where and how these repetitions arise, a new way of understanding postmodernism's persistence is produced.

These repetitions of postmodernism provide a different way of perceiving the present, shedding new light upon the continued relevance of postmodern aesthetics. Postmodernism as it was may not be able to account for all aspects of the contemporary moment, though this does not mean it has been succeeded. Postmodern aesthetics are repeated and altered in contemporary American culture, illustrating a change that must be accounted for in the literary criticism that considers contemporary American fiction. The changing ways the deadlock of advanced capitalism is confronted illustrate a process of transition that extends the American postmodern epoch into the twenty-first century. It is not that culture and postmodernism remain unchanged, but that their shared ability to change without producing radical epochal transformation is integral to postmodernism's contemporary repetitions. It is not a question of seeking to succeed postmodernism, or simply collapsing the contemporary moment into a historical image of postmodernism. Instead, it is more productive to consider how contemporary American culture and writing continues to be informed and shaped by the legacy of postmodernism. Postmodern aesthetics provide a means of confronting this continuum, reflecting back the complex reality of the contemporary cultural moment in a set of diverse and at times contradictory ways.

Postmodern aesthetics continue to pose questions of how to orientate oneself within a twenty-first century American culture. When criticisms of consumerism staged within an inescapable advanced capitalism are necessarily hypocritical, postmodernism continues to articulate the contradictions of this claustrophobic experience. To navigate these experiences is to necessarily repeat postmodernism, whether this continuum is acknowledged or dismissed. If it is neither possible to comfortably return to modernism,

nor progress to a new stage ‘after’ postmodernism, the insights postmodernism offers continue to provide ways of navigating this disorientating experience. By interrogating how canonical postmodern texts are repeated in the present, and also how contemporary novels repeat postmodern ideas, the textual analyses of the preceding chapters have outlined the two central ways postmodernism is repeated today. Essentially, postmodern aesthetics are both integrated into contemporary American culture and also utilised by contemporary American fiction. This recurrence within American writing presents the complex legacy of postmodernism, where the framework of repetition provides a new way of confronting the persistence of postmodernism.

Repetitions of postmodernism connect the selection of works included here, spanning four decades, to confront the gap between discourse on postmodernism and the present moment. They present a discrete set of repetitions that combine to illustrate the differing yet connected ways the legacy of postmodernism continues within American fiction and culture. Postmodernism encapsulates the contradictory complexities, disillusionment, cynicism and openness, providing a way of articulating an experience of reality that has, in many ways, become more rather than less culturally relevant. Collectively, these texts foreground the complexity of succession – both of postmodernism and advanced capitalism – encapsulating the broader issues that underpin its evolution within contemporary American culture and writing. What is most pertinent about this analysis is not that acclaimed postmodern novels resonate with societal tensions in contemporary culture, or even how contemporary American writing repeats features of postmodernism. More specifically, it is that postmodernism continues to be repeated in an array of disparate ways, informing its contemporary cultural currency.

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