

# **Manifestations of nihilism in selected contemporary media.**

**Marco René Olivier**

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Supervisor: Professor Pieter N.J. Duvenage

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## Summary

This study focuses on the concept or phenomenon of **nihilism**, given the regularity with which it manifests itself (to anyone who is aware of it in more or less theoretical or philosophical terms) in all kinds of **cultural artifacts** such as films, television shows or series, books such as novels or philosophical texts, and magazines. Most of these artifacts can be grouped together under the heading of the **media** in the present era. The objective of the study is to use the concept of nihilism to identify and analyse selected cases in contemporary media -- in the form of **films** and **television series** -- to answer the question, with what kinds of nihilism people would come face to face if they knew how to recognize them.

The study begins with an outline of a **theoretical framework** concerning the concept of nihilism. A number of thinkers' work is used to come to grips with the complex phenomenon, but mostly it is **Nietzsche** whose thought seems to be valuable for present purposes. In the second chapter the spotlight falls on what is called (in this study) '**capitalist nihilism**', which seems to belong with what Nietzsche called '**passive nihilism**', but also seems to exhibit some aspects of '**active nihilism**'. The third chapter is an examination of nihilism in a foreign (Japanese) culture by concentrating on **Japanese anime**, to test the differences between Western (historically Christian) culture and one with a different cultural and religious history. The last chapter consists of the analysis of a specific (Western) film, *I 'heart' Huckabees*, which was selected because of the variety of 'nihilisms' found in it. The study seems to confirm that nihilism is indeed widespread in contemporary, postmodern culture.

**Key words:** Active and passive nihilism, capitalism, media, film, Japanese anime.

# **Manifestations of nihilism in selected contemporary media.**

Marco Olivier.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction.**

Inevitably, as in any conversation to be overheard in social circles around the world, polite inquiries eventually turn to the subject of current endeavours. Questions are asked and polite answers are given. Just as inevitably, when the person I am speaking to learns that I am busy writing my treatise, they politely ask what the subject of said treatise might be. I start by trying to get away with a very general explanation, saying that I am writing on the subject of nihilism, praying that they will not inquire as to the meaning of nihilism and the exact method by means of which I will be examining the concept of nihilism, and in which context this will be done. The reason for my very heartfelt hope in these situations that I will not have to go into extensive explanations of my treatise or of the concept of nihilism, is the simple fact that trying to explain nihilism and the implications thereof in today's society can be very difficult when someone knows nothing about it, especially if they do not have a background in the relevant disciplines. Speaking about nihilism and its influences throughout modern society with colleagues who understand the concept is very rewarding, but trying to explain it in lay terms can be incredibly painful.

For this reason I have decided that my very first task using the first chapter in this treatise dealing with the complex concepts of nihilism in our mediated world will be to explain this concept of nihilism in such a way as to enable even an individual most unfamiliar with Nietzsche or Dostoevsky to have no trouble following the greater complexities in the main body of theorising and critical application of this theory. My treatise deals with the effects of nihilism in modern society; specifically the visible results of nihilistic influence as seen in the visual medium of film (the cyclical nature of the relationship

between nihilism and its representation in this medium is central), as well as the reasons for the intense nihilism seen in Japanese culture and the way it is exposed in one of Japanese culture's distinctive features of expression -- namely Japanese animation. The relationship between nihilism and capitalism is a very important aspect of my research, and as such will be explored.

When I was young I looked upon my parents and I *knew*, I just *knew*, that they were working towards some goal; they knew the secret to life, the reasons for our existence, and that one day when I too took my place as a fully fledged adult member of the fraternity of human existence I would also be privy to this incredible knowledge, and work towards this obviously amazing goal. Slowly but surely, however, these concrete notions started to erode as the incessant and powerful waters of experience and reality battered them into grains of disbelief. At some point in my school career I realised that my parents were no more privy to the secret and vaunted 'meaning of life' than I was, and the reason that they did what it was that they did was in fact because it was one of the choices which they were faced with in their lives, much as I would be. Another blow to my rather optimistic expectations was the fact that there was no apparent transition between child and adult - I still do not feel that I have reached the state of 'adult' as I conceived of it as a child, and in truth I doubt anyone feels they have reached that state. You may wonder where I am going with this, and what this has to do with nihilism. I am trying to recreate the blissful ignorance and belief of a child that does not seek for a greater purpose of meaning in life, because as a child there is an implicit belief that such a purpose exists and will be introduced when the time is right. Nihilism, to put it very basically, is the state of mind reached when one comes to the realisation that no such greater purpose lies in wait, flowering in our minds when we reach some kind of age-triggered Enlightenment. Nihilism asks the question 'why' of existence, 'what is the point' to being, without getting an answer. It is the realisation that we are not part of some greater plan, that we do not just slot into some predetermined role aimed towards realising the greater purpose of existence. When one asks the question of the meaning of existence, and comes up with the answer of mere existence itself, one has reached a state of nihilistic perspective. Nietzsche states in his definition of nihilism 'That the highest

values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; “why?” finds no answer.’ (Nietzsche, 1968: 9). Naturally this realisation begs some kind of reaction, and it is in this reaction that we find the various flavours of nihilism.

### Theoretical Framework:

The world of people, or society, is filled with value systems constructed by the many and varied cultures and societies that have proliferated in the history and geography of human existence. These value systems give the people that buy into them a formula to existence into which they easily fit. When Nietzsche wrote about nihilism Christianity and by association Christian morality was the most influential and pervasive set of constructed values in the society in which he existed. As a result of this Nietzsche stated that at that time a state of nihilistic perspective was reached as a result of ‘The end of Christianity - at the hands of its own morality (which cannot be replaced)...’, ‘... the sense of truthfulness... is nauseated by the falseness and mendaciousness of all Christian interpretations of the world...’ (Nietzsche, 1968: 7-10) Nietzsche believed that nihilism was rooted in the Christian-moral interpretation of distress. He also believed that skepticism is decisive in finally reaching the perspective of a nihilist, in that once someone has believed and lived with a set of values for a long period of time, the person will be skeptical and suspicious of any other value system for interpreting the world. I agree in part with Nietzsche; the end of Christianity was the end of the single most dominant value system in that era in Europe and America, and was probably the greatest bearer of the rising nihilism in those societies - but I also believe that similar reactions have come about as a result of the history of other religions or even the fall of value systems unrelated to any religious beliefs.

I briefly mentioned the fact that the realisation of a nihilistic perspective demands a reaction. Nietzsche classifies the first realisation and experience of nihilism as ‘radical nihilism’: ‘... the conviction of an absolute untenability of existence when it comes to the highest values one recognises; plus the realisation that we lack the least right to posit a beyond or an in-itself of things that might be “divine” or morality in cold’ (Nietzsche,

1968: 9). This radical nihilism must be reacted to; Nietzsche described two types of nihilism to explain the reactions to the loss of value systems.

One of the two classifications is that of passive nihilism. Again Nietzsche explains this as a reaction to our failure to realise our notion of the 'true' world beyond language and appearance, precisely because we have constructed this notion while it is not applicable, and results in our falling into despair. I explain passive nihilism as being a kind of 'ostrich' reaction, and an inability to cope with the enormity of the realisation that we are a tiny and an unimportant part of existence, that we do not hold a greater significance and central importance in some greater scheme. The passive reaction is to search for an already constructed set of values, or dogma, found in something such as religion. Of course in modernity and indeed postmodernity there are many such constructs to be found. These include archaic religions that have belief systems which are outdated and completely incompatible with the modern era, yet still find massive numbers of converts who are too insecure in their own existence to cope without the idea that there is some kind of massively powerful parental figure around which everything revolves, and by association everything revolves around individuals who have 'faith'. Many of the 'newer' religions are still in fact based on the same moral framework as the archaic religions, supposedly revitalised by being formulated in a modern context, and hold to those same ancient ideals that simply do not fit in with today's society. Consumerism follows the same framework as the religions, only the deity is replaced by consumer goods - not specific goods, but whichever goods are in greatest demand; in chapter two I will elaborate on this. These systems of belief are numerous and varied, but they all share a common principle: they have ready-made values which any person can just adopt, and suddenly 'fit in' - no longer will they feel lost and alone in a hostile world. This reaction is a denial that tries to ignore or just bury the ideas that are part and parcel of a nihilistic realisation. Megill describes passive nihilism as the adoption of a 'passive and anaesthetic attitude' towards the reality of crisis in the null of nihilism, null referring to the value system failure (Megill, 1987: 33). The characteristics of passive nihilism can be seen in many movies that put forward a specific ideology or dogma. These movies can be recognised by their return to traditional values, which is often accompanied by the

search for a hero that embodies the values inherent in the ideology being espoused in the text. An example of this is the movie by the Wachowski brothers, *The Matrix* (1999), which, when one analyses it, comprises archaic values couched in ultra-modern style; it is a Messiah story, albeit an incredibly violent Messiah, more suited to (post-)modern times and tastes. Another instance of such a reactionary film is Shayamalan's *Signs* (2002), with its signal promotion of the archaic religious idea of predestination, incongruously articulated in a narrative involving alien invaders.

The other type of nihilism (or reaction to nihilism) as laid down by Nietzsche is that of active nihilism. Active nihilism can be seen as being the 'courageous' response to the realisation of radical nihilism, as opposed to the 'cowardly' response of passive nihilism; a passive nihilist hides from existence behind the sham 'belief' in some greater purpose, whereas the active nihilist decides that the best way to face the grim reality of the nihilistic world is to create meaning for themselves through specific activity. This can be seen and achieved in many different ways: creating art of some type that holds meaning for an individual, and meaning for any who would be hold it (meaning that they attribute to it, as with any interpretive art); writing a book; working to help people, in medicine, social services, or in a myriad other ways; striving for excellence in some endeavour, be it sport or other. Sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish between a positive or a negative nihilistic reaction, and I find the easiest way (though not the only way, and not an infallible way) to ascertain if something is passively nihilistic or actively nihilistic is to ask the question concerning whether the values held by a specific person are personally constructed, or are they values the people merely buy into on a massive scale. It is impossible for an individual to hold values unaffected by the society in which that individual has been raised and now resides; these kinds of influences are what shape our perspective on the world, and will always affect us. It is the ability to interact critically with these values, and decide for oneself whether specific beliefs are to be upheld or not, that makes the difference between being passively nihilistic or not. An orthodox Christian does not question the faith -- indeed, that is exactly what religious faith is, a belief in something without any proof, or indeed in the face of proof against all that it espouses.

I have borrowed some of the thoughts in writing from some great thinkers to try and explain more clearly the concept of active nihilism.

Colebrook (2002: 12-13), commenting on Deleuze's thought, speaks about his view of philosophy, art and science in a way that describes active nihilism to me:

Philosophy, art and science need to be seen as distinct moments of the explosive force of life, a life that is in a process of constant becoming. It is not that we have a world or life that philosophers or writers then describe or interpret. Each act of art, science or philosophy is itself an event and transfiguration of life. And each transformation changes life in its own specific or singular way...If we understand the power that drives this production then we will be able to maximise our creativity, our life and our future.

Colebrook (2002: 18-19) also talks about the strong link between Nietzsche and Deleuze where she emphasises that, for both of them, philosophical concepts were supposed to be 'active' – they should create connections in the world, and not only function as 'labels' of the way the world is already organised. I think this statement is very valuable – for philosophy, but also for art that goes further than repeating the same old formulas over and over. The artist's (or film director's) aim should also be to create new connections in the world (which is very difficult in today's world with its never-ending stream of especially popular art).

For Nietzsche the proper response to the realisation of nihilism is not to find another basis for value systems, in other words another basis for the 'truth' of our existence, rather we need to be able to live with the world as it is here and now -- this according to Nietzsche is active nihilism, which is 'a sign of increased power of the spirit' (Nietzsche 1968: 17), instead of the pessimistic belief that the world does not have the value that was attributed to it earlier. For Nietzsche there is a link between active nihilism and happiness, according to Colebrook: 'Happiness is the capacity or power to live one's life

actively -- affirming the particularity or specificity of one's moment in time' (Colebrook 2002: 19).

Megill says much the same thing with reference to Nietzsche's notion of active nihilism:

Instead of drawing back from the void, we dance upon it. Instead of lamenting the absence of a world suited to our being, we invent one. We become the artists of our own existence, untrammelled by natural constraints and limitations (Megill 1985: 34).

The possible difficulty in attributing active or passive nihilism comes with the realisation that there is a fine line when it comes to differentiating between actively searching for or creating meaning or merely copying what has come before. We are surrounded by already constructed value systems, values are embedded in the very languages we use; one has to ask the question 'is it possible to be actively nihilistic within the passively nihilistic structure?' - such as any orthodox religious structure. My answer to this is yes; it is possible to create your own meaning within existing structures. What one has to try and avoid, and in fact is something that Deleuze maintains is a danger to art, philosophy, literature, and indeed many other disciplines, is the homogenisation of the way of thinking connected to these disciplines (Colebrook 2002: 11-15); an example of this would be art in a specific form that is merely copying successful art, with out any critical or creative-interpretive value whatsoever -- this can also be referred to as kitsch. Kitsch itself, in any form, is passive nihilism -- copying pleasing structures simply for the sake of aesthetic appeal (see Olivier 2003 & 2004). We all live in the capitalist society, at least mildly subject to its moral and ethical value system. Under capitalism everything can be attributed a monetary value, thereby breaking down existence into almost totally economic terms. We all have to function in the system associated with capitalism, because it is impossible to exist in the modern world without taking part in the capitalist model. That means that we are all consumers, although some seem to exist merely to consume, spending their time awaiting the next 'amazing' product that will be mass-produced and mass-marketed in such a way as to appear absolutely essential to anyone's life.

Consumerism is a passively nihilistic system, but capitalism is more ambiguous. One of the ideals of capitalism is that of innovation, constant improvement and constant progress -- technology is fuelled by the ravenous beast that is capitalism; but the largest percentage of the products we see on the market are not innovative, nor any improvement on what has come before. Yet even in this one can find active nihilism; marketing and advertising are some of the most capitalist professions in the world today, but they do indeed involve and in fact need incredible creativity and innovation. The passive nihilistic principle underpinning all this creativity, however, is the fact that, in the final analysis, it serves the profit motive – that ‘value’ to which all creative activities in a capitalist society may be reduced, and which is itself nothing intrinsically ‘valuable’, the way a person’s pet, child, or girlfriend (or boyfriend) is ‘valuable’. People *can* use the structure of capitalism to help others, though; the constant increase in technological advancement leads to greater and greater possibilities of communication and ‘development’ for humanity, even if it is at a tremendous cost to the natural environment. This is a paradox we find repeated many times with regard to nihilism; there are no absolutes in this theory, I believe and wish to show that individuals can be passively and actively nihilistic in different aspects of their lives, and that there are in fact differing degrees of nihilistic response. For this reason it is difficult to answer the question: Is it possible to say someone is entirely actively or passively nihilistic?

An example of active nihilism within a passive structure is that of Beyers Naudé, a reverend in the main Afrikaner church (the Dutch Reformed Church) during the apartheid era. Beyers Naudé had a personal belief system based on the passively nihilistic system of Christian religion, which was functioning as an adjunct to the greater passively nihilistic system of apartheid. Apartheid can be seen as being passively nihilistic because it is a return to the very basis of belief systems in human development, that being the exclusionary system of ‘them and us’, separatism -- it is always easy to believe that you are not insignificant, that you are special because you belong to some specific group which is better than all other similar groups (racism). Despite basing his own value system on the archaic, outdated framework of an organised religion, he utilised those

very beliefs to work for change in a very active sense. Instead of taking the easy route and living a life of privilege as was guaranteed to anyone who was white in the apartheid era, he endured terrible conflict to fight for the rights of all other race groups living in South Africa. Along with his religious beliefs, he believed in the value of every human being, thus activating a principle which comprises part of the Christian religion, in an oppressive political situation in such a way that it could function to promote political and social freedom for all citizens.

I do believe that capitalism plays a major part in the mass reception of nihilism in modern society. In chapter two more attention will be given to capitalism, but provisionally the following may be said. In essence capitalist ideology applies monetary or exchange value to anything, and if it cannot attribute a monetary value to something then from a capitalist perspective that thing does not exist. It is in this intrinsic economic evaluation and conversion into exchange value, as well as the quantification of such, that we find the roots of the relationship between capitalism and nihilism. Individuals in society, specifically westernised society, are 'taught' from an early age that the only way to measure success (despite the vaunted references in the media to the fact that, supposedly, money is not the be-all and end-all of life) is by material wealth. This invariably leads to the fact that these individuals will measure their own self-worth by success or failure to earn enough money to be considered wealthy. I find that one can further define a nihilistic reaction to capitalism in its own specific way, refining the definitions of active and passive nihilism. An active reaction to what I will call 'capitalist' nihilism is a denial of the valuing of everyday existence in terms of exchange value; an attempt to divorce oneself from monetary implications. Of course it is almost impossible to live in today's 'money market' global society without interacting with the capitalist system -- in other words it is impossible to live without money. This makes a truly pure, active reaction to capitalist nihilism just as impossible. One could argue that Amish farmers have reacted in such a way, but that would be a mistake. The Amish engage in capitalism, the particular reaction on their part is to resist technology, besides which they are already strongly engaged in a passively nihilistic attitude in that they cling almost desperately to anachronistic religious structures. Staying away from technology in no way means that

someone is not taking part in the capitalist system. Communism is also not an active reaction to the capitalist system, as Communism is based as much on the primacy of material goods and social relations determined by this as capitalism, albeit with a different mode of distribution.

Because of all this it is apparently not possible to have this active reaction of which I speak. That too is not entirely true though, I believe that reactions to any type of nihilism function in degrees. It is when one sees the world from an entirely capitalist perspective, in other words when one 'instinctively' attributes exchange value to everything in one's life, including acquaintances (in the belief that one should constantly 'market' oneself), that one has entered a passive reaction to capitalist nihilism. An active reaction to my mind is when one's value system does not involve monetary evaluation; when one lives within the structures of capitalist culture so as to be able to exist, but finds true meaning through one's own constructive efforts (of course not efforts with the accumulation of capital as the ultimate goal).

Anyone existing in the world today, who engages even to a small degree with the capitalist culture predominant in the world at the moment, should be able to identify examples of the effects of the capitalist perspective in human societal relationships. It is seen every day in the media; the ingrained nature of this perspective is used to sell capitalist commodities, by using the basic human state of 'lack' emphasised by Lacan in his theory of the human subject (Lacan, quoted in Lee 1990: 58), combined with the capitalist perspective to convince likely consumers that they need items that they definitely do not need. The capitalist perspective is used to make people want items which are more expensive to purchase than similar items simply because they are more expensive. This is achieved by the triggering of self-evaluation in monetary terms (through advertising for example), in conjunction with the terror of being viewed as poor; only a person without money (in other words a worthless person according to capitalist perspective) would buy the cheaper item - common sense at the mercy of societal pressure. The societal hierarchy in every westernised country on the planet is constructed

around wealth - there is no hiding the fact that the wealthy among us are revered simply because they have managed to accumulate vast amounts of material wealth.

Whether someone is incredibly wealthy or not is not the deciding factor when it comes to someone being actively nihilistic, or passively nihilistic in response to capitalist nihilism. The deciding factor is found there, where their greatest values lie; the wealthiest of people can be obsessed with material wealth, building their entire worldview around their financial identity, that is to say how much they are worth economically. They have neatly slotted themselves into a passive reaction to capitalist nihilism, a response predominant in today's society on any level. A wealthy man, Wittgenstein, one of the greatest philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, once gave away all his money to become a gardener, because he found greater meaning in his life by gardening. This is an active reaction to capitalist nihilism, albeit a very extreme reaction.

Defining an 'actively nihilistic' action may seem to be tricky (despite what was said about it earlier on), but there are certain properties which can be searched for in order for this to be done. I will use art as an example of how to recognise the difference between a passively nihilistic reaction, and an actively nihilistic one. Art by definition is creative, or so we are led to believe. Not all art is good as art, and it is this distinction which we can use to distinguish between a truly creative and active artwork, and a passive rehash. A term which comes in useful here is that of 'kitsch'. I am sure that most people have heard the term bandied about in relation to art, interior decoration, architectural style, and many other things. I doubt, however, that many of the people that hear this word, or indeed use it, have any clue as to its true meaning. General consensus has turned the word into a colloquialism which ultimately means that whatever it is referring to is not in good taste. This is true, although it is merely the most superficial explanation of the idea of 'kitsch'. To understand the depth of meaning behind the term one has to understand why one piece of art is great or 'good art' and another is 'kitsch'.

Olivier (2003) discusses 'kitsch' in contemporary culture, referring largely (but not only) to Harries' exploration of 'kitsch' in the 1960s. He confirms that kitsch art is by no

means art that is characterized by any bad technique; in fact, kitsch art very often incorporates excellent technique, and many critics who put a large amount of emphasis on technique and would hail art with excellent technique as great art simply because it is technically flawlessly created. So here we have a minor kind of paradox; bad art, with flawless technique. If the definition of good or bad art is not based on the technical perfection of the piece, then it must have something to do with the meaning associated with and derived from viewing it. What meaning are we talking about? Sometimes when people are confronted by an artwork it evokes powerful emotions, emotions related to memories or emotional memories concerning the image facing them; an example of this would be someone who experienced the happiest time of their lives during the era in which Elvis Presley was the greatest entertainer, and is thus synonymous with this part of their lives, who then sees a painting of Elvis Presley, or a statuette, which then evokes sentimental memories -- but these emotions are ultimately just enjoyment of emotions remembered, enjoyment of one's own feelings for their own sake, instead of the communication which should occur between art and audience. Many people would disagree with this assessment, as the emotional memories have an authenticity which undermines the kitsch properties of the artwork. Olivier explains this paradox (2003: 104):

There is no doubt that the sentimentalism with which people may regard the miniature Cadillac-phone (Elvis portrait) marks it as kitsch, but the memories of authenticity evoked by it tend to undermine its kitchiness precisely because these are probably memories of excitement and desire -- desire that can be attached, in memory, to specific individuals, like lovers and friends. Conversely, the sentimentalism so typical of kitsch tends to subvert the authenticity of the memories in question. The paradox, then, consists in the tension between what is remembered and the sentimentalism which pervades (that is, the wallowing in the feelings that accompany the memories).

Harries believes that the term kitsch was probably first used in the second half of the 19th century to referring to a certain genre of paintings, such as those which catered to the

tourist market by representing unspoiled Alpine Mountains scenes. He goes on to observe that (quoted in Olivier 2003: 105):

The word soon acquired overtones of moral disapproval: those paintings were called kitsch which seemed to show a lack of integrity and which catered to the longings of the sentimental bourgeois. It is in this sense that the word appears in art criticism today... kitsch is considered bad art; on the other hand, kitsch is not simply bad art, but bad art of a particular kind. Here 'bad' is used not so much in an aesthetic as in a moral sense. Kitsch is perverted art, and to understand this perversion, we have to relate art to a standard of truth or morality. If aesthetics conceives itself to be only an autonomous discipline, divorced from effects and ontology, it must fail to understand kitsch, for kitsch is a hybrid.

This serves to exhibit the moral implications which kitsch fails to represent, as it tends to interact in a nonreflective manner with the audience, serving itself up to hedonism instead. What is required for something to not be kitsch is distance, but not merely one's sense of distance; Harries qualifies that in fact there are two senses of distance required. The first of these is the distance between audience and artwork; the secondly, the distance within the subject -- usually of a reflective nature. Good art, both Olivier and Harries state, is dialogical; that is to say that good art, be it a painting, a movie, or a piece of music, must communicate with the viewer. True art is critical, of itself and of the society in which it exists, whereas bad art, or kitsch, is self-enjoyment -- a wallowing that does not confront anything; rather the viewer-artwork dialogue becomes irrelevant, as the sentimentalist feelings engendered take precedence. Harries explains the seductive qualities of kitsch in the contemporary world where emotions require artificial stimulation, because true emotion becomes more difficult to come across (quoted in Olivier 2003: 107):

... what is enjoyed or sought is not a certain object, but an emotion, the mood, even, or rather especially, if there is no encounter with an object which would warrant that emotion. Thus religious kitsch seeks to elicit religious emotion

without an encounter with God, and erotic Kitsch seeks to give the sensations of love without the presence of someone with whom one is in love... Kitsch creates illusion for the sake of self- enjoyment.

It is here that we see a blatant link to nihilism: postmodern culture is addicted to kitsch, in that mainstream society cannot seem to get enough meaningless saccharin emotional stimulation from the seemingly endless supply of sugar-coated soap operas and popular 'feel-good' movies that provide 'external' emotional catharsis instead of having to deal with 'real life', by letting viewers feel emotionally resolved through the actions of others (in this case fictional others). These surrogates for life-experience serve as a type of withdrawal, an anaesthetic to the world. In a movie such as *The Matrix* (1999) people experience 'liberation' with the coming into power of the character Neo, by the fact that he manages to take control of his own life and escape from the dreaded power of The Matrix -- little do audiences realise that they are in fact stuck in the very same situation, as they are giving up their power over their own lives and are being sucked into the 'empowerment'(actually disempowerment) offered by the sleek and flashy scenes and script of *The Matrix* movie; their very own Matrix. This flipped maneuver always makes me think of the book *1984*, written by George Orwell (1983) and first published in 1949, and how a mechanism like this would have served the governmental control group Big Brother very well. The masses feel liberated by being vicariously saved from the great oppressive forces dreamed up for the movie, without having to think about which organisations are the true oppressive forces in their very real existence, those being collectively the great economic tyrant capitalism, and its agents the multinationals. Here we find another link between nihilism (passive nihilism) and capitalism, in the way in which, as Olivier says, postmodern kitsch (2003: 109):

...serves the ever-expanding and strengthening interests of the multinationals -- interests which are ostensibly purely economic, but on closer inspection are seen to be inextricably intertwined with political interests and power. Such kitsch provides the fictional space for self-enjoyment as well as the vicarious illusions of liberation or liberty on the part of the viewing public, in the process castrating them politically.

In this way capitalism, in the guise of the multinational companies, enforces a passively nihilistic outlook on to the consumer public, using the mediated anaesthetic they in fact pay for to disempower, infantilise, control and then sell their product to this consumer public. The passive nihilistic element here is the reduction of viewers or consumers to precisely that: 'consumers' whose only pseudo-activity is a passive consumption of the thrills and fixes (products) dished out by the large conglomerates. I will elaborate on this topic in the chapter on the relationship between capitalism and nihilism.

Jameson (1993: 10-16) observes that there has been a 'waning of affect' in postmodernity, to be replaced by 'intensities'-- that is to say that, as far as art (for example) in its many forms today is concerned, it tends to 'lack a proper referent'; there is no meaningful dialogue between a member of society and the piece beyond the triggering of sentimentalist emotions. The way this works as an anaesthetic, or a way to withdraw from the world falls in with passive nihilism. Movies that critically engage audiences concerning the society in which they live become less and less popular as people prefer the 'intensity' or cathartic high provided by the 'sugary pills', such as the soap operas or the films that tend towards *The Matrix's* style. Many movies are released that follow this trend, especially in response to traumatic events in the world, such as the World Trade Center disaster, or 9/11 as it is referred to. Many films which people would not have thought of as a reaction to this happening are in fact just that; *Signs* is such a movie. The reason I say this is that the message of the movie comes out as 'Don't worry, it will all be all right in the end', fed along the lines of a religious subtext. It is made out that all the terrible things that occur in the movie occur for a reason, so as to 'pre-destine' the future of those left alive -- typical religious dogma: don't ask why things happen, just 'know' (i.e believe) that they are part of a greater plan. In this way the passively nihilistic system based on the Christian religious and moral worldview allows people to feel that they are not in fact insignificant, being part of a grand plan, and also removes most of the responsibility for the actions they take in their individual lives.

What I have quoted from Harries was written before 1968. At that point the world was not nearly as mediated as it is today, and kitsch in the media not nearly as prolific as it is at the moment. In the present era the kitsch movies are the drug of choice for most members of society in the developed, and in many cases the developing world. People flock to the cinema to get the 'rush' they crave in the contemporary boredom that so afflicts post-modern society. It may be that the reason for the mass saturation of contemporary culture with kitsch is the boredom generated by 'the world receding from the subject' (Olivier 2003: 108 -109). Harries confirms this (in Olivier: 108-109 ):

Wherever we find boredom, an inability to discover enjoyment in the world, we can expect a movement away from the world to the pleasures of self-enjoyment... If the world does not satisfy our demands, what remains except to enjoy ourselves? In Kitsch man strives for an immediate relationship to himself which offers an escape. Man strives to regain paradise, not by returning to what has been lost, but by building a substitute and by forgetting that it is his own invention. Man enjoys himself, his illusions, and even his anxieties and thus escaped from the problems posed by his being cast into a world which ultimately seems to make no sense. That this project is built on illusion does not matter...

This 'boredom' they speak of can, I believe, be explained in nihilistic terms to give it more definition. I see this boredom as another way to describe the first 'realisation' of nihilism; I see it as a response to the saturation of society with capitalist values in almost every respect, and especially the feeling of insignificance that accompanies the realisation by an individual that he or she is merely an insignificant member of society, who has to follow the rules (which are nowadays made by the multinational companies as a result of the economic tyranny) and try to fit into the postmodern 'money-market' world. People feel constrained, and this boredom, or a type of listlessness, is the result of this feeling, because of which they buy into popular mass art in the form of feel-good movies so that they may vicariously defeat that feeling through the catharsis and emotional 'orgasm' provided by the sleek, glitzy experience-loaded sugary pills.

As anyone can see in our world today, the most popular and influential art forms, as well as entertainment construct, is that of the media, with movies being the pinnacle or paradigmatic form of that medium. That is why I have chosen to explore nihilism through that most prevalent of influences on our mediated society. A movie like Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) is an exploration of the darkest forms of nihilism, including 'capitalist nihilism'. This is definitely not a feel-good movie, as it exposes the boredom, confinement, and listlessness of society -- and also how desperately people seek meaning, leading to reactions both passive and active. I find nihilism apparent in almost every movie of the present time, be it as a conscious critical exploration, or as a product of widespread nihilism, that the producers do not realise is such. Movies such as *Harold and Kumar go to White Castle* (2004), *Eurotrip* (2004), and *American Pie* (1999) explore the young adult reaction against the 'realisation' of nihilism, with the young individual characters in the films fighting for an identity and path of their own in the over-constructed and currency-obligated global society. The connection between nihilism and capitalism thus seems to me to deserve more focused attention.

## Chapter 2

### Capitalism and Nihilism:

‘Money - the form of capitalist value - abstracts and dissolves all relationships, replacing them with the cash nexus. This sets going the ruthless competitiveness inherent to capital, since if money is the only true bond, then there are no true bonds at all, and universal envy, suspicion and mistrust reign.’

Kovel: *The Enemy of Nature*.

As I showed briefly in the chapter describing my theoretical framework, capitalism and nihilism are very closely linked, especially so in the contemporary currency-obsessed global market economy society. In the world of today money has become the universal lubricant; money is influence, power; money guarantees access, it even demands reverence. The wealthy exist as icons, the pinnacles of success, what each and every other individual in capitalist society should be striving for, or so we are led to believe. Businessmen hold far greater respect in today's culture than great thinkers, scientists, or even artists -- unless of course the latter make huge amounts of money. This is because the discourse of capitalism – in the sense of a particular use of language where certain interests and values are systematically prioritized - is the most powerful discourse in the world today. Every individual, barring those living subsistence lives, has to engage with this discourse every day of their lives; it invades every aspect of (post-) modern life, and this is where we find the problem. Nihilism, as Nietzsche would say, is found when the highest values in someone's life are found to be meaningless. Nietzsche (Megill 1985: 71-75) maintained that there is no culture that can be a vigorous culture unless it is founded on an unquestioned myth. Modern (and postmodern) culture does not have a myth like that; when Nietzsche said ‘God is dead’ he meant that Western culture has lost its founding myth, or the myth that was for centuries the foundation of Western values. One can add, today, that capitalism has taken its place -- it is not a myth in a Nietzschean sense, because there is nothing in capitalism that justifies itself, it merely reduces

individuals to empty vessels, creating needs in people together with the illusion that these needs can be endlessly satisfied by capital.

‘Capitalist nihilism’, which I spoke of earlier, is a type of nihilism which, I suggested, came about as a result of the capitalist perspective being imposed on society from the moment people are able to understand language (and even earlier, through media-images on television). The reason I suggested that this ‘capitalist nihilism’ exists as a slightly different, more specific, form of nihilism beyond the more general categories of nihilism cited by Nietzsche, is the way it functions in society. The capitalist perspective, or the perspective whereby one judges and evaluates all one comes into contact with in a quantitative monetary fashion, functions as a value system which can be seen to have taken the place of the Christian moral system that used to dominate society in the time of Nietzsche, but with which people are indoctrinated even more effectively and diligently, due mainly to the fact that capitalism uses the incredibly pervasive and invasive agency of the media as a vehicle for its continuous bombardment of the public by its consumerist messages. The difference comes in when one realises how meaningless reducing everything to monetary terms really is; unlike discovering that organised religion holds no meaning for one, and being able to turn away completely from those values, one cannot completely turn away from the values that hold sway in capitalist society, because it is impossible to exist outside of capitalism and still be a part of the global society. Because of this both passive and active reactions to capitalist nihilism must be formulated and happen within the structure of capitalism. Refusing to interact with the mechanisms of capitalism would mean that one would be unable to use money in order to survive, in that one would not be able to buy food, for example.

As I have stated before this does not mean that it is *not* possible to ‘react’ in an active way, contradictory as it may seem. Individual reaction depends on perspective, and the degree to which one accepts and engages with the capitalist perspective as a value system will determine whether that person's ‘reaction’ is active or passive. There are many examples of both active and passive reactions to capitalist nihilism within the structure of capitalism. An example of an ‘active reaction’ can be seen in what has been referred to as ‘gutterpunks’. The film director Penelope Spheeris featured this strange social

phenomenon in her movie *The Decline of Western Civilisation III*. The 'gutterpunk' phenomenon is a 'movement' amongst the young people in the most developed of countries, the United States, almost exclusively from wealthy (upper-middle-class) young people, who voluntarily decide to live on the streets of cities such as Los Angeles in extremely deprived conditions. Most people, especially those who struggle to make ends meet, would probably think this is just plain stupid, but that would be because they do not realise what is actually going on to cause this reaction. Olivier, in *The Price of Development – Western Style* (1999: 29), suggests that this 'movement' can be seen as being similar to the hippie movement that was a social phenomenon in the 60s. He maintains that this earlier movement signified '...a rejection, by virtually an entire generation, of an older generation's value-system...', and that the gutterpunk 'movement' is a similar rejection of a value system that surrounds them in their normal living environment, although he suggests that this is not just a rejection of a generation's value system, but rather the rejection of the value system of an entire nation. I agree, but I would suggest that it is not the value system of a nation that is being rejected; rather, it is the rejection of the global capitalist society's value system -- a refusal to adopt a capitalist perspective. These individuals would rather do without the benefits of a wealthy existence, along with the obligations of this existence, preferring to revert atavistically to what amounts to a virtually primitive life on the streets -- perhaps to what could be called the primitive values of mere survival. They seem to be searching for meaning that does not involve the amount of money that one earns, or the type of car one drives. This reaction, although it is impulsive and childish (and in the end not very effective), is a good example of an extreme 'active reaction' to capitalist nihilism -- a powerful rejection of capitalist doctrine, despite the fact that these individuals do not actually themselves seem to understand why they are reacting this way, nor can they articulate their feelings about their need to do this. They speak relatively aimlessly about the need for 'freedom', and in this vague reference we can see the reason for their need to escape. Although they are unable to pinpoint the actual reasons for their feelings of confinement, I believe I can explain them. The seemingly fluid and dynamic structure of capitalism -- often disguised as such with cliché phrases such as 'you can do anything you put your mind to' -- is in fact far more restricting than we allow ourselves to realise.

The gutterpunks have realised this on an intuitive level, resisting the subtle yet powerful pressures of societal hierarchy and capitalist acceptability impelling them on certain life-paths so that they will fit in with the rest of capitalist society.

A less extreme example of young people trying to find some meaning beyond the materialist mindset is exhibited in various movies concerning the transition from youth to adulthood. An example of this type of movie is *Wayne's World* (**date**), also directed by Penelope Spheeris. The movie demonstrates the battle between 'monetary' success and finding true value in life with a more creative, less economically conventional basis. The basic story deals with an independent television show which the corporations try to syndicate, and which, when syndicated just becomes a mouthpiece for the corporations, and a stand for product placement. The show becomes yet another cog in the corporate wheel, but fortunately the young creators of the show decide that they do not want to sacrifice their own values and creativity in order to be financially rewarded.

A well-known example for the passive reaction to capitalist nihilism is a phenomenon which started in the eighties, and is still going strong. This is the trend of the yuppie: the young, upwardly mobile professionals, who love nothing but (or, at least, more than) money. The yuppie judges everyone and everything according to exchange value, and success for such a person is definitely based on material possessions and the amount of money in the bank. They do not care what kind of person anyone is, what they do care about is whether a person drives the latest 4x4 and wears the latest brand name clothing. We see this mentality at work in almost any sphere of human existence. At school (formative years), the time in which people are exposed to the capitalist perspective on a continuous basis, young people are ostracised or accepted depending on what kind of clothing they wear, the computer they use, or a myriad other materially centred judgments. A movie which exposes the emptiness of this type of passive capitalist existence in a brutal but brilliant fashion is *American Psycho* (2000), based on a book of the same name by Brett Easton Ellis (1991). The main character in the movie is shown to have absolutely no value system beyond materialism; in fact, the main character, Bateman, is shown to be an 'empty vessel' -- he seems to have no personality, a theme

which is highlighted several times in the movie, whereby individuals are only differentiated by where they live, what their business card looks like, and what clothing they wear. The emptiness of his existence drives Bateman mad, yet even when he confesses to committing murder, those who comprise his social circle seem not to care much, even ignoring his desperate confession. Natural selection in the human ecological system no longer focuses on physical strength, but rather is determined by economic strength. Many times I have heard the phrase 'from a good family' in the context of a romantic liaison, but this does not mean that an individual is from a family that 'does many good deeds', rather the family is well moneyed. Small wonder the gutterpunks feel confined; from the moment of birth the financial situation into which they are born determines their role in society. The yuppies represent just the opposite extreme reaction.

Reactions to capitalist nihilism are not limited to individuals, but can be seen on a macro scale as organisational reactions, even as large as on the part of governments. The degree to which a country's government engages with the ideology of capitalism, either tempering it or letting it run wild, will show the hold that capital has in that country. Unfortunately there is a pattern which can be seen in this regard; Third World or developing countries are desperate to attain equal footing in the world economy with the developed countries such as the United States of America and most of Europe, which means that the governments of these countries will sacrifice almost anything for material gain. South Africa, as an example, is a perfect specimen of just such a reaction. The ANC, arguably an originally Communist/Socialist political party, has bought wholeheartedly into the capitalist agenda being promoted by the developed countries. For this reason governments of developing countries are willing to take on projects such as the Coega project being developed in the Eastern Cape. This project involves the building of, among other things, an aluminium smelter, which is incredibly harmful to the environment, and which the developed countries that are unwilling to build in their own countries are more than happy to foist on to the still developing world, knowing their desperation for economic enrichment, and not caring about their natural ecology. In fact, this brings out the link between capital, ecology, and nihilism; the reaction to the ecological crisis, or any real thought of the ecology possibly being damaged by their

actions, on the part of an individual (and organisation) that has adopted a completely capitalistic perspective can be seen as being parallel to that of passive nihilism. As long as they do not see it, or it does not impact on their daily lives, they just ignore any consequences of their destructive actions for the sake of short-term profits.

This headlong rush into capitalist economy by developing nations is an attempt to follow the example of the greatest capital-driven country in the world, that being the United States of America, a liberal democracy. A liberal democracy promotes the rights of the individual, which in itself is arguably a good ideology, but which plays into the hands of capitalism. Capitalism functions by feeding on the needs and wants of individuals, which can only be satisfied by individual success in the incredibly competitive (thus isolating) market economy of a liberal democracy. This, however, by necessity dictates a certain moral deficiency in societal interaction; to succeed in such a purely money-driven society, one cannot take into consideration the needs and well-being of other members of the society, as they will also be trying desperately to accumulate material wealth, and will do so at the expense of anyone other than themselves. This is how capitalism isolates individuals and undermines communities, by pitting them against one another -- risking the possibility of someone else taking advantage of altruistic actions prevents any possibility of those altruistic actions as a defence measure – by which I mean that any action taken without considering the consequences in a material sense could lead to others taking advantage in the cut-throat capitalist world in which money is more important than people. In this way capitalism (despite not being a sentient entity) defends itself from being phased out. It is kept in place by one of the most fundamental emotions in human existence, namely greed.

Human ‘nature’ in forms such as greed is the reason that the supposed answer to capitalism could not function successfully. I am of course referring to communism, according to which all individuals of a country would serve some useful function, so that all functions for social existence are covered, and each of these individuals would receive the same ‘slice of the pie’. Everyone in the society would theoretically be equal to one another, no matter what role they fulfilled in society (Marx in McLellan 1986: 70). I say

theoretically, because human nature makes this an impossible societal model; firstly, resources would have to be limitless, because human nature is never satisfied, hence the principle of accumulation that Kovel refers to in his book. Marx serves to explain accumulation (Marx in Kovel 2002: 41):

However, as representative of the general form of wealth -- money -- capital is the endless is the endless and limitless drive to go beyond its limiting barrier. Every boundary is and has to be a boundary for it. Else it would cease to be capital -- money as self-reproductive. If ever it perceived a certain boundary not as a barrier, but became comfortable within it as a boundary, it would have declined from exchange value to use value, from the general form of wealth to the specific, substantial mode of the same. Capital as such creates a specific surplus value because it cannot create an infinite one all at once; but it is the constant movement to create more of the same. The quantitative boundary of the surplus value appears to it as a mere natural barrier, as a necessity which it constantly tries to violate and beyond which it constantly seeks to go.

Secondly, this model does not take into account power relations. Capitalism has a direct relationship with power; in contemporary society power can be equated with access to money, and human beings invariably want power. As the Orwellian saying goes: some will always be more equal than others. The collapse of the Soviet Union proved quite effectively that this model could not work, with some great examples of how quickly an equality-oriented Communist state can turn into a fascist dictatorship -- enter Stalin. I do believe, however, that there is an active reaction on a governmental scale. One can see such a reaction in the governmental policies of a country such as Norway ([www.norway.org.uk](http://www.norway.org.uk)). The government of Norway is what is referred to as a social democracy. This means it is a compromise between capitalist and socialist ideology. The economy of the country is still a capitalist economy, but the government has imposed a level of social and economic (tax-based) control so as to temper the normally ruthless and insatiable mechanics of a fully capitalist society. As a result of this governmental regulation most people in the country earn roughly the same amount. The Socialist

influence in this kind of system can also be seen in the many government-funded basic services, such as a completely free health system, as well as totally subsidised education. Those who decided on this system must have realised that a country cannot exist outside of the global capitalist society, or without interacting with this society. They also realised that capitalism running riot creates massive divisions in society, mistrust, and a much faster degradation of natural resources as a result of the continuous degradation of the conditions of its production. The end result is a country fully capable of interacting with the global capitalist system, while not promoting only the generation of wealth, but in fact creating an egalitarian society where its citizens can concentrate on things other than the continuous desperate accumulation of material wealth that so characterises capitalist society. As far as nihilism is concerned, it is significant that 'material wealth' is monodimensional -- something that the 'gutterpunks' seem to sense intuitively.

Capital, in the form of money, is supposed to be a means to an end; it was created as a simpler form of value representation for barter purposes, an abstract representation of concrete goods. Capitalism has changed this fact and relationship, money has now become the goal, no longer the way of achieving other goals. Making money, simply for the sake of making money, is the new directive for any capitalist organisation, even though the continuous quest to increase monetary income and economic viability while supposedly providing the foundation for social life, increasingly seems to serve no purpose other than to increase those factors. The workers do not earn any more than they did before -- in fact due to the nature of capital and its drive towards constant technological innovation, numbers of workers will probably decrease over time in order to cut down on expenses in a company. The only people becoming wealthier in this type of system are the 'owners' or shareholders, who most likely already hold more wealth than all the employees of their company put together. In his book *The Enemy of Nature* (Kovel 2002:38) Kovel states in Marxist terms that there are two constants by which capitalism functions: 'capital tends to degrade the conditions of its own production', and 'capital must expand without end in order to exist.' This explains why companies lay off workers despite the fact that they are making more money, because they are increasing efficiency -- in other words cutting down on expenses, such as payment of workers, as

long as they can produce quantitatively the same amount of as before (or more). Capitalism, as many would say, does indeed continue to introduce and develop techniques whereby the degrading of the conditions of production actually gives rise to a commodity; this includes pollution control (devices, or an entire work-sector devoted to this task). The problem, however, from an ecological perspective is the fact that capitalism cannot be contained, and that it will continue to grow and evolve, to a degree which far exceeds the measures and speed of those developments that counteract the strain put on nature. Capital cannot be confined (Kovel 2002: 41): 'Capital is quantitative in its core, and imposes the regime of quantity upon the world: this is a 'necessity' for capital.' ('Regime of quantity' is parallel to the capitalist perspective in my interpretation.) 'But capital is equivalently *intolerant* of necessity; it constantly seeks to go beyond the limits that it itself has imposed, and so can neither rest nor find equilibrium: it is irremediably self-contradictory. Every quantitative increase becomes a new boundary, which is immediately transformed into a new barrier.'

In the capitalist system money itself has become the 'greatest value' sought by the populace in general. This is where the core of capitalist nihilism is to be found; in the so called 'regime of quantity', the constant evaluation, in quantitative terms, of almost every aspect of life. Surely buying useful items is the reason for money? Can it truly be an end in itself? Money is abstract, no longer representing something concrete as it once did; in fact, most of the money in the world exists only as abstract representation -- numbers communicated from one computer terminal to another. Yet the totally nonabstract world is subject to what the money dictates, in the form of the degradation of the means of production -- hence the notorious Bhopal disaster (Kovel 2002: 28-38), in which case the natural world (tangible reality) was put at risk, and in fact harmed tremendously in order to save abstract dollars. To many this may seem completely nonsensical, but to someone completely immersed in the capitalist perspective who sees the world in price tags, this may seem perfectly commendable, as what the multinational company was risking in the end did not -- in monetary terms -- warrant extra expenditure. Even though what was at risk were human lives and other life forms; even these, despite any platitudes you may

hear from the mouthpieces of huge corporations, will be viewed by these corporations in the same way as an asset – an expendable asset.

Kovel explains very well how the abstract ‘exchange value’ has become dominant over the more practical ‘use value’ (Kovel 2002: 39):

Commodities appeared at the dawn of economic activity, and commodity production became generalised with the advent of capital. The germ of capital is inserted into each commodity, and can be released only through exchange, and with this, the conversion of what is desirable into money. To employ a formalism employed by Marx, which we shall find helpful to express our ideas as we proceed, every commodity is a conjunction of a ‘use-value’ and an ‘exchange-value’. Use-value signifies the commodity's place in the ever-developing manifold of human needs and wants, while exchange-value represents its ‘commodity-being’, that is, its exchange ability, an abstraction that can be expressed only in quantitative terms, and as money. Broadly speaking, capital represents that regime in which exchange-value predominates over use-value in the production of commodities -- and the problem with capital is that, once installed, this process becomes self-perpetuating and expanding.

An easy way of demonstrating the difference between use value and exchange value is to compare diamonds and water. Diamonds are incredibly expensive, while water is relatively cheap (at the moment) -- diamonds are in truth almost useless to people, whereas water is totally essential to the continuation of life. Admittedly I am ignoring various other factors involved in this ‘pricing’; I am just trying to point out as effectively as possible the difference between exchange value and use value. Another example would be that an old suit, or a dress, that a person is very fond of, has high use value for him or her, although these clothes’ exchange value would be very low.

The link between capitalism, ecology, and nihilism emerges from the examination of the perspective one has on the world. As I stated, capitalist nihilism is constructed by the

adoption of a perspective through which one continually evaluates and categorises things (and even people) using quantitative monetary standards. To be able to stand atop a hill and look down on a vast forest and see, not the humbling and awe-inspiring forest that evokes powerful emotion, but possible raw materials to be turned into commodities and then into profit, be it paper, or some type of resort requires such a capitalist perspective. That is definitely a passively nihilistic reaction in that the feeling of purposelessness -- which results from realising that the forest's 'greatness' is no longer underpinned by the previously self-evident greatness of God the Creator - is not reacted to in an active and creative fashion, but rather by wholeheartedly assuming the value system of capitalist culture. With this perspective one is completely invested in generating wealth by investing in the immediate present without regard to consequence beyond projected financial gain. The capitalist perspective focuses on the potential for profit of the immediate, as well as on planning in a financial sense. The capitalist ideology does not usually include environmental awareness beyond the knowledge of how to exploit natural resources as commodities (conceivably, it could develop such an awareness, if it could prove to be profitable). Although being part of a passively nihilistic system (capitalism), the capitalistic attitude towards nature and natural resources is in fact 'radically' nihilistic. The yawning abyss of meaninglessness that is the realisation of nihilism has been forced into the periphery by the assumption of quantitative monetary values, where the need for greater accumulation of wealth is the one and only concern. Nothing else matters, so the consequences of destructive capitalist action on the ecology -- even *National Geographic* (2004) has devoted almost an entire issue to this under the cover heading: *Global Warning* -- which (no matter how ignorant you may be) everyone knows is fast-tracking the ecological doom of the planet Earth, is of no concern. 'Nothing matters, nothing means anything, so why look beyond the moment, why worry about extraneous, delayed consequences?' This is radical nihilism in action.

All that seems to matter is furthering the great ideal: development. And this is one of great coups of capitalism: the continuous accumulation of wealth, the never-ending cycle of surpassing barriers in this accumulation, is all lumped under the supposedly benevolent title of 'development' which Lyotard describes aptly as the ideology of today

(Lyotard 1991: 6; see also Olivier 2004a:). Capitalism hides the ugly truth behind a facade of supposed altruistic 'progress'. In the recent past evidence (widely broadcast in the media) has emerged, outlining the fact that the North Pole will, at the current rate of global warming, have completely melted away within the next 50 years. It seems that the company that sponsored the study actually had the nerve to maintain that despite the alarming nature of this news, there was good news hidden amid the catastrophic implications. This 'good news' was the fact that, without all that ice, it would then be possible to drill for oil in that region. Oil, probably one of the most exploited resources of the industrial era and beyond; oil, the uses of which send the ecological status of the planet closer and closer to ruination; oil, the commodity with the most influence in the world economy; oil, over which wars have been fought. This type of sentiment is common amongst the global capitalist elite; commenting on the increase in storms (violent storms) as a result of global warming after France was hit by a number of these storms, Herve Kempf said (in Kovel 2002: 47):

It looks as though the world's economic decision-makers have decided to do nothing about the climate change on the basis that if no change happens, we shall take advantage of a form of growth that continues to intensify the greenhouse effect; and if it does happen, we shall be able to protect ourselves from it - and it may even have a favorable effect on the global economy.

Of course he is not referring to most of the world populace with the term 'we'; rather this refers to the capitalist elite in the developed countries. France was able to weather the storms without much damage, and a slight stimulation of the economy due to spin-off economic activity resulting from storm damage. Other countries, not developed countries, are less fortunate on this front; shantytowns and bad roads do not make for much safety during violent storms -- in Venezuela rain-induced mudslides killed thousands of people living in shantytowns where they should not have been situated, but where they had to be located because they were poor. But to capitalist culture, and through capitalist perspective, these people do not count, because they do not affect global economics, be they alive or dead -- they are inexpensive human debris, not even

quite consumers. Kempf even had the nerve to make this comment (quoted in Kovel 2002: 47-48): ‘Venezuela’s flood victims counted for little economically in so far as the country’s oil output remained unaffected.’ Only with capitalist values can one value oil output above human lives.

The multi-headed agent that capitalism uses to maintain its illusions is the media. The media are at the same time capitalism's greatest asset, *and* also the means for the strongest criticism that may be directed at it. Capitalism uses the media to indoctrinate and then to maintain and enforce the capitalist perspective (and therefore by association passive capitalist nihilism), something which is incredibly effective in the contemporary mediated era. The pervasiveness of the various forms of media in contemporary culture means that controlling this communication tool allows invasive access into the lives and thought patterns of billions of people around the globe. Steger (quoted in Parkes 2005: vii) states that ‘The Culture of advanced capital aims to turn society into addicts of commodities consumption, as a state ‘good for business’; Parkes (2005: vii) links this through Kovel to the media and the ecological crisis, quoting him:

... the evil is doubled, with reckless consumption leading to pollution and waste, and the addiction to commodities creating a society unable to comprehend, much less resist, the ecological crisis... capital produces wealth without end, but also poverty, insecurity and waste, as part of its disintegration of ecosystems.

To achieve this, capitalism embarks on a campaign similar to that of any drug pusher, yet completely specific to capitalism, aimed at solidifying and evolving addiction: Branding. Branding is to advertising the same as modern computers are to ancient abacuses. It is a process of manipulation, overt and covert -- subliminal *and* blatant.

Branding, one might say, is what advertising has evolved into. No longer is advertising aimed at merely selling a product; the primary objective of advertising has become the selling of a lifestyle associated with a particular brand. Each different brand offers its own set of values, which the advertisers use to sell their own particular lifestyle image.

The selling of this 'image' has become more important than selling the actual product. The reason for this deals with identification; branding sells an image of a lifestyle that, in contemporary society, everyone wants to have. By linking consumer desires to a specific commodity the advertisers are able to let consumers identify with the lifestyle through these desires, and then in a reciprocal relationship identify with the commodity through the brand - owning the commodity immediately gives someone a foothold into the lifestyle associated with the product, which is generally far removed from their true day-to-day existence. This identification also allows producers with a strong brand-loyal following of consumers to sell their products at higher prices, not because they are in any way better, but because the consumer is getting to be a part of a supposedly exclusive lifestyle. In fact, one of the most brilliant (and at the same time most deceitful) marketing strategies in branding has been the suggested inference, by certain brands, that the consumer will be more a part of the lifestyle they so desire if they buy the more expensive commodity - simply because they can afford the most expensive variety, and only a 'poor' person would worry about the price. These branding campaigns have managed to make consumers terrified of seeming poor (similar to the yuppie mindset).

Branding therefore makes use of capitalist nihilism, as well as simultaneously reinforcing it. Without people constantly affirming the intrinsic value of the various facets (things, relationships) of life, the quantitative monetary values assigned to those same facets become the dominant value system, which tends to overlay the previously more primary 'use-valuation' of these life-facets. Branding gets much of its power from the capitalist perspective, as the lifestyles that it sells are invariably associated with great wealth. Some would disagree, saying that Camel cigarettes used images of a real tough man hiking through a jungle and then having a well-deserved cigarette in his macho independent way, not once including some sign of wealth - but ask yourself whether someone who is not wealthy could afford to disappear into the jungle for a while to go hiking. The man is the epitome of strength, youth, and adventurousness - none of which actually have anything to do with smoking. In the Peter Stuyvesant advertisements the people smoking the cigarettes are always at some incredible resort skiing, or taking part in some other exotic pastime. Consumers who see these advertisements never stop to consider the fact

that there is no way that buying those cigarettes and smoking them will get you anywhere near living that lifestyle. For them the link with the desired lifestyle is created through the branding, and they are unable to separate the real from the imaginary.

The branding campaigns all appeal to specific consumer audiences, such as those campaigns which appeal to the young teens and young adults, all of whom are particularly susceptible to anything involving a desperate desire to fit in with their social peers. Steger (2003: 77) points to the astonishing (and disturbing) fact that, in the united states, children as young as the age of two have already developed brand loyalties. It is to this need and desire that companies like Oakley, Nike, and Coca-Cola appeal. They define what is 'cool' and acceptable, selling this image, which in turn sells the products they create. More recently companies such as these have been branding events and activities -- such as Nike creating an association between the very concept of running (not just competitive running) and their brand, in a sense saying that running is not running without Nike in some representative form. Coca-Cola has gone as far as to make out that Coca-Cola links every person upon the planet. The most recent advertising campaign by Coca-Cola involves linking the consumer (any person that might drink Coke) to famous people by the fact that they have also drunk Coke (a bit of a thin link, but with the emotive capabilities of the media, catapulted into wondrously meaningful transcendent bonds); they even have the nerve to mention Che Guevara by name as someone who, by having participated in the elevating activity of drinking coke, is linked to every other coke-consumer. It is incredibly ironic, one of the greatest multinational companies, a huge part of the capitalist elite, using one of capital's greatest opponents to sell its products and advance the cause of capitalism. The thought that drinking a Coke makes you one with all the people across the globe is pretty silly when you really think about -- if that were the case you have the same result coming from the fact that all humans breathe air and drink water.

So then, how do the facilitators of branding manage to take such ludicrous ideas and make consumers believe them? Most simplified, it comes down to identification, in that if the marketing strategists can find a way -- such as a desire or need -- to get the

consumers to identify with a product, they can foster loyalty towards a specific brand (see Parkes 2005: 22-40; on 'New social identities' and branding). The other required ingredient for branding to function properly is a vehicle with which to communicate the suggestive and manipulative message across to the consumer public, and this vehicle is the media. Contemporary society is media-saturated to a degree never before seen in human history. The media have served various masters very well throughout the years since their inception, such as Hitler (Hitler was the first to use the new medium of radio as an effective tool for propaganda; Shlain 1998: 404), Stalin, even the apartheid government in South Africa; yet even these masters of media manipulation would be appalled at the incredible effectiveness of the modern media as purveyors of capitalism. Not only are contemporary media a vehicle for the movement of capitalist indoctrination in the home of almost every person on the globe (those that cannot be reached because they cannot afford televisions do not count in the eyes of capitalism, as they cannot buy much anyway, but prices are always coming down), they are in themselves among the most lucrative commodities in the global economy. On the whole, if considered as a single entity, the media are the single most influential form of communication in contemporary society; of the various forms of media, what are probably the most influential at the moment are the audio-visual media, those being television and film.

These media, while being among capitalism's strongest assets, are at the same time the most effective tools for the criticism of capitalism. The programmes and movies that are created for the media are products of our society, a society in the grip of nihilism, mostly brought on by the apparently liberating, but really confining and controlling forces of capitalism. This means that the prevailing collective feeling and the current axiological state of society will be echoed in these media creations, allowing one to analyse them in this context so as to ascertain what value-influences have shaped society, and in what shape that society is currently (or at the time of the creation of the particular artefact). Certain movies are created specifically as a critique of the society which spawned them; two movies that would fall into this classification are *Thirteen* (2003), directed by Catherine Hardwicke, and *Kids* (1995), directed by Larry Clark. Both of these movies are examinations of the way in which children grow up in what is probably the most

capitalist society in the world, the United States of America. *Thirteen* shows the effect that branding has on the young, as the story shows how a young girl makes her way into the young teen world where your social status is completely dictated by the brand of clothing you wear. It shows how the passively nihilistic structure of capitalism replaces internalised family-oriented value systems with capitalist, quantitative and media-orientated value structures. *Kids* is far bleaker in outlook than *Thirteen*, examining the day-to-day lives of young people who do not have a lot of money in New York city; the reaction we see in these individuals is along the lines of radical nihilism. They participate in a life of complete hedonism, where the future does not matter, only the now. All the different artefacts of this nature (such as films, videos, advertisements) can be examined as an expression, purposeful or accidental, of the axiological status of society.

Susan Faludi, in her book *Stiffed* (Faludi 1999: 35), suggests that in the 'ornamental culture' of today media-images have become more real to some people than what would normally be considered concrete reality. These individuals believe that you only exist, really exist, if you have been on television. The media as a collective seems to support this assumption in the way that they create iconic figures out of movie and television stars; the fairytale dream existence the rest of society would love to be able to partake in. This is all part of 'ornamental culture', the result of the influence of 'kitsch' on contemporary culture.

All of these mechanisms that capitalism uses to ensure a docile consumer base are parts of a vast passively nihilistic construct, similar to the idea of the Matrix in the movie of the same name; a structure which gives the illusion of fulfillment and an active, creative life, while truly being a manipulative confining system which reduces 'consumers' to passive stimulus-response automata.

## Chapter 3:

### *Anime* and Nihilism; Nihilism in a foreign culture.

Nietzsche maintained that the main cause for what he called European nihilism was what he referred to as the 'death of God'. He of course did not mean the literal death of God and destruction of the Church as an institution, or the physical destruction thereof by any antireligious group, but the death of the Church as the seat or metaphysical anchor for societal moral values. Japanese culture has only been influenced by Christianity in the most minor of ways, with the latter only arriving on Japanese shores in 1542, brought (ironically along with gunpowder) by the Portuguese. It was banned, in one instance 26 members of the Christian clergy being executed as an object lesson; it was actively opposed by the government until 1873, when religious freedom was adopted as a reform after the fall of the Tokugawa government. Today less than 1% of the population of Japan is Christian. Despite the fact that they have had little contact with Christianity, the Japanese exhibit much in the way of a nihilistic attitude; as I will show slightly further into this chapter it is displayed very strongly through their media ([www.japan-guide.com](http://www.japan-guide.com)). Obviously they could not have been affected by the 'death of God' in far away Europe (Japan was almost completely isolated from the rest of the world during the Tokugawa era); therefore, another set of events concerning value systems (possibly originally also religious in nature) must have conspired to bring about the presence of nihilism in their culture, as I believe is to be expected in the evolution of a society in the post-modern capitalist era.

Delving into the history of Japan allows me to speculate and suggest which events were collectively responsible for the sudden devaluation of the internalised value systems of the Japanese population in much the same way as the Nietzschean 'death of God'.

When I look at the religious history of Japanese society two major religions stand out: Shintoism and Buddhism. Shintoism, which is still (in the same way as Christianity in

Western countries) a widely held religion in Japan ([www.japan-guide.com](http://www.japan-guide.com)), has no scriptures or sutras equivalent to the Bible. It is the indigenous religion of Japan, and is deeply rooted in the people and traditions of the society. Shinto stands for ‘the way of the gods’, and the Shinto gods are referred to as Kami. These gods are not gods as traditional Western religions would know them, rather, to describe them in a way that will shed more light than a direct translation of the word used to refer to them, one should describe them as spirits; spirits of things that are important in human life, including abstract things such as concepts. Examples of the spirits would be the spirit of a river (each river would have its own spirit), or the spirit of the rain, the spirit of a mountain, or indeed the spirit of fertility. Humans become Kami when they die, and are then worshipped and revered as ancestral spirits. The Sun Goddess Amaterasu is the most important and influential Kami in the Shinto belief structure. Shintoism is an animistic belief system, animistic meaning that the religion is predicated on the belief that everything is ‘alive’ or permeated by a life-principle, perhaps describable as a ‘soul’, in some way (in the case of Shintoism that ‘life’ would be the Kami), which would then make it a very nature-friendly religion. Because this religion, though perhaps not constantly practised by the Japanese people, maintains a deep-seated presence in Japanese culture as a result of its intertwinement with many Japanese traditions and way of life, I believe this connection to nature plays a part in the nihilism inherent in contemporary Japanese culture. I will show this connection slightly later in the chapter, in relation to with some more history and background of Japanese society and culture that I wish to explore. In contrast with most monotheistic religions, including Christianity, there are no absolutes in Shintoism, no concrete right or wrong, and people are not perfect (admittedly in Christianity ‘sinful’ people are considered to be decidedly imperfect). Christianity derives much of its power through the cultivation, in its faithful, of an incredibly heavy sense of guilt, which is designed to make Christians feel constantly guilty about almost anything they do, and there is very little that is not considered sinful in the Christian belief system. In fact, in Christianity people are considered to be full of sin from birth, a situation they are assured is impossible to change -- quite different from the far more optimistic Shintoist perspective. A very important difference between Christianity and Shintoism is, to my mind, the fact that Christian

values are rigidly constructed and often firmly imposed in certain religious communities, whereas the Shintoist value system would be far more particular to each individual as a result of the flexibility in its beliefs.

The peaceful religion of Buddhism is far more well-known than Shintoism, and has many millions of adherents around the world. Started in India by the Buddha, Gautama Siddhartha, Buddhism was introduced into Japanese culture in the sixth century C.E. ([www.japan-guide.com](http://www.japan-guide.com)) as a gift from the Korean kingdom of Kudara (Paikche). It was welcomed by the nobles of Japan, and was adopted as the new state religion, but did not initially filter down to the peasants, being made inaccessible by rather complex theories. At first there was some conflict between Shintoism and Buddhism, but the nature of these two religions resulted in them soon being able to coexist harmoniously, in many ways even complementing each other. Buddhism deals with the idea of Karma as one of its central themes, which essentially is the belief that any action will be revisited on the perpetrator at some other point on the 'wheel of life'. The first branch of Buddhism to enter Japan was one of the main branches, the Mahayana or Greater Vehicle Buddhism. There are many different Buddhist sects which made their way into Japanese culture through the course of history. Zen Buddhism is one of the most popular forms of Buddhism outside of Japan, but not in Japan itself. Buddhism is also a very nature-friendly religion, making both of the major religions in Japanese culture closely tied to nature. Both Buddhism and Shintoism have a lot more moral flexibility than Christianity, making it very difficult for either of these religions to be responsible for the rather sudden loss of internalised value systems in the way that the failing of Christianity given its relative rigidity as a fundamental belief system, seeing as the more personally unique adherence to Shinto and Buddhist spirituality relies far less on external components. The connections between these religions and the rise of nihilism is found in their relationship with tradition (Japanese culture is historically very formal and traditional) and nature, in context with the massive changes in Japanese culture during Japan's industrialisation, as I shall try to explain.

Early in Japanese history all the different clans were unified under an emperor of the Yamato clan rulers, a dynasty which, although only symbolic for a long period of time now, still continues today ([www.japan-guide.com](http://www.japan-guide.com)). Military rule took over the true political power in Japan quite far back in its history, although the various military leaders, despite having taken power by force, still sought the approval of the emperor (who was merely a figurehead). The transfer of power to the military came as a result of the rise of the powerful warrior class known as the *Bushi*, or samurai. Until the era of industrialisation Japanese society was strictly segmented into five classes, with the samurai being at the top of this hierarchical system, with the merchants, peasants, and artisans making up the next three tiers; the fifth class comprised outcasts -- people whose occupation was considered impure. This rigid societal structure was most apparent during the Edo period, which lasted from 1603 until about 1867. It is also during this period that the Tokugawa government of the time enforced an isolationist policy on Japan, almost completely cutting off all influences from the outside world. Japanese citizens were forbidden to travel outside of Japan, and the only international contact was through very limited trade with China and the Netherlands through the port of Nagasaki. Western literature, in fact all foreign literature, was banned until 1720. During the first part of this isolationist era internal agriculture and commerce flourished, and new art forms such as Kabuki Theatre became increasingly popular. Towards the end of the era however, corruption in society became rife, as the merchant class held a huge amount of power through financial means, and many samurai were indebted to members of the merchant class. This resulted in a class imbalance. The government's steadily worsening financial situation caused taxes to be raised and in this way also caused riots amongst the farming population. These factors, combined with outside pressure to end isolationism led to the eventual collapse of the Tokugawa government, to be followed by the Meiji era, in which the emperor was restored to political power in the new capital of Tokyo, supposedly leaving his status as 'figurehead'. The true political power rested with a council of former samurai and nobles, however Japan had also been forced to sign unequal trade agreements with the Western powers, which gave the Western nations legal and financial advantages even on Japanese soil.

The Japanese government of the time was determined to catch up with the Western powers militarily, scientifically, and economically so as to be able to regain Japanese independence in these matters. The massive reforms that were undertaken to be able to achieve this end changed Japanese culture drastically. The social hierarchies which had governed Japanese society were slowly dissolved, with the samurai no longer being recognised as the ruling class -- the era of the samurai had ended. Scholars were sent abroad to learn Western science, and compulsory education was instituted in Japan itself. Many more 'progressive' changes were made during this period, with the end result being a massively changed Japan, with one of the most dramatic changes being the fact that Japan had managed to industrialise within two decades -- an absolutely incredible speed of economic transformation ([www.japan-guide.com](http://www.japan-guide.com)).

I believe that this transition had a similar axiological effect on Japanese culture and society to the effect Nietzsche suggests the waning of Christian moral influence had on European culture and society. Up to that point Japanese societal value systems had been based on the strict segregation of social hierarchies, along with the very formal and traditional nature of Japanese society. In the space of a few years these traditionally held value systems gave way to the new westernising influence on society. As I mentioned earlier, both Shintoism and Buddhism were nature-friendly in their values, and industrialisation (as we well know) relegated nature, by contrast, to the status of commodity. This transition is one of the most important phases in Japanese history, and is often thematised in the Japanese media, specifically forming the basis for many a plot in a very popular Japanese medium known as *anime*, a type of animation. This era also served as the backdrop to Zwick's film *The Last Samurai* (2003), which documents the struggle by the now disenfranchised samurai to retain the honoured status they had previously enjoyed. This aspect of the film I find to be quite interesting - the conflict between traditional values and what is generally thought of as progress. Unfortunately, the film serves a passively nihilistic function, as it exemplifies old traditional values (those of the Samurai era). Instead of allowing people to realise that it is possible to create meaning for oneself, it suggests that assuming the already constructed values of an outdated system is acceptable.

After the initial rush to industrialise the economy, the Japanese populace were able to immerse themselves in the greater causes of ‘military’ imperialism, spreading Japanese influence and dominance throughout Southeast Asia, and culminating in World War I and World War II. This is similar to the pattern that the Western nations went through.

After World War II Japan was occupied by the victorious allied forces; Japan had been devastated by the war, and the military domination of the Japanese government had finally been ended. General MacArthur, the first supreme commander of the Allied occupying forces, forced a new constitution onto the Japanese, which effectively changed the Japanese government into a democracy -- complete with Parliament, Cabinet, Prime Minister, and universal suffrage (women only got the right to vote in this forced constitution, and traditional submissiveness on their part continues to this day; see Mezrich 2005:186). The emperor was once again stripped of power, and Japan was forbidden to make war or maintain an army. Japan cooperated with the occupation forces, which comprised mainly US forces, and soon after occupation a so-called ‘reverse course’ policy was adopted by these forces. Japan was allowed to create a self-defence force, and adherents of communism were persecuted -- most of these changes were the result of the United States manipulating its position in the occupation to create advantages in the Cold War. In April of 1952 the occupation ended, and the Japanese economy went from strength to strength, resulting in the rapid rise of the standard of living, but also resulting in massive-scale pollution. The financial growth continued until 1973 when the world oil crisis shook the Japanese economy rather heavily, to which it reacted by shifting to high-technology industries. The result, as we know, is the Japan of high-technology that is one of the major players in the growth of contemporary electronic technology ([www.japan-guide.com](http://www.japan-guide.com)).

An interesting commentary on Japanese culture compares it to the Borg in the popular sci-fi series *Star Trek* ([www.thejapanfaq.cjb.net](http://www.thejapanfaq.cjb.net)). In Japanese culture less emphasis is placed on individual effort and in industry the society functions in a collective way. Company managers and owners do not get paid ridiculous amounts of money as their

Western counterparts are, making all the workers far more economically equal. Company loyalty is very important to Japanese businesses, and a huge amount of effort is put into ensuring such loyalty from employees. This collective way of thinking is very possibly partially generated by the enforced close proximity of everything in Japan. The country is slightly smaller than California, with 75% of the available land being uninhabitable. A further 15% is used for agriculture, leaving only 10% to be lived on by the population of 126 million people, almost half that of the United States. Adding up the mix of incredible population density, strong economy, a taste for technology, and very high per capita income, one gets Japanese consumer culture -- it is unlike any other consumer culture around the world. With the removal of the traditional value systems, combined with rampant technophilia, consumerism and the capitalist perspective have taken the place of these values. Yet even with the degree to which Japanese society has answered the need for new values with the development of technology and consumerism, the society is conflicted in its search for more meaningful values than the empty, confining, and glitzy values offered by consumer culture; this casting about expresses itself through a very popular form of media in Japan, which is also increasing its popularity at an exponential rate throughout the rest of the developed world - *anime*.

*Anime* is Japanese animation – ‘cartoons’. It is not, however, a film-category of cartoons in the sense that most Western television or film viewers are familiar with. Most Western cartoons, such as *The Smurfs*, are for children only, whereas *anime* exists for almost any demographic group you could imagine; there is even a category for previously delinquent single mothers. *Anime* deals with some very serious topics, even children's *anime* deals with serious issues, such as death; Western cartoons and adaptations by Western-style media of *anime* tend to steer very clear of any such issue. *Anime* is based on the popular comic book type publications known as Manga comics, with successful Manga comics being converted into *anime* series. Manga is exquisite with its own particular style, and to become a Manga artist takes a lot of hard work and a large amount of time. Manga, and by association *anime*, tend to have a large amount of ‘reality’ in their stories; I do not mean that there are not fantastical creatures in fantastical settings - the largest number of *anime* film have an extremely fantastical thread in the plot - what I mean by ‘reality’ is

the fact that they deal with issues that are a very real, or socially relevant, such as the nature of the relationship between 'good' and 'evil', showing that in fact good and evil are far less clearly defined than the dictionary definitions would have us believe. *Anime* shows both sides of a conflict, first portraying one side as being 'good', and in the very next instant showing the motivations and reasons of the supposedly 'evil' group's actions, demonstrating that despite the fact that each side may view the other as being 'evil' it is a matter of perspective that will decide which is which. The 'reality' extends further in that the Japanese work ethic (which is incredibly strong) is a definite thread in most *anime*, with the characters going to school or to work amidst the less mundane happenings of the series. It deals with consequences of the actions by the characters portrayed, something which I find sadly lacking in most media.

The characters in an *anime* show are truly 3-D characters, with the plot being generated by the characters, not the characters being inserted into a plot. These characters will learn and grow over time and through experience -- reminiscent of the western *Bildungsroman*-tradition -- another 'reality' that increases the interest factor of *anime* shows. Something which ties in with nihilism through *anime* is the message (involving the work ethic) that if one tries hard enough it is possible to achieve a result which is meaningful. The most important aspect of *anime* for my research is the fact that it serves as expression of the tensions in the culture that produced it, in this case Japanese culture. Analysis of certain themes and the *anime* shows which express those themes gives great insight into Japanese culture. In this way I will show the nihilism inherent in this culture. Something which one must be aware of, and at the same time beware of, are the adapted versions of *anime* series released in places such as the US -- this includes *Dragon ball Z* and *Pokémon*, which have been altered to fit Western cartoon style. I wish to stress that *anime* is one of the most popular forms of media entertainment in Japan, which caters for almost any conceivable audience, to such an effective degree that it is growing in popularity outside of Japan at an incredible pace.

The first theme I will explore is that of the incredible tension between technology and nature. As a result of an affinity for nature derived from the ingrained and deep-seated,

although most probably unconscious, connection through the Shintoist and Buddhist belief systems, judging by *anime* themes, the Japanese population displays a significant degree of collective guilt for the ruin that humanity and technology have brought upon the planet Earth. This theme is explored in many *anime* series and movies. The first example of such a series is *Blue Gender* (1999); the series takes place in a post-apocalyptic world in which all humans of Earth have had to escape into space stations orbiting the planet, as what seems to be an alien race appeared almost out of nowhere and has managed to put humanity on the endangered species list. The action centres on a group of human resistance fighters who use enormous mechanical robots to fight the supposed alien threat. In the course of the campaign to try and rid the world of the fearsome creatures the group finds out that these creatures are not alien at all, but are in fact part of a drastic response by nature to rid itself of a dangerous infection that is destroying it at a massive pace (much like the human body's defence against infection): this threat is humanity itself. This is an obvious expression of the guilt – backlash resulting from technological and industrial development which is causing so much destruction in natural terms.

This theme is repeated in *X(TV)* (2001), in which seven champions for the Earth and seven champions for humanity must decide whether humanity will perish in order for nature to survive, or whether humanity will survive at the probable cost of nature, which could lead to the destruction of humanity at the same time (though this outcome would give humanity the chance to redeem itself and possibly reverse the course of natural destruction -- this could be construed as being a 'fictional' warning suggesting that our chances for preventing a catastrophic breakdown of nature may be running out). The ultimate decision is left to a very ordinary young man who must become the final champion for one side or the other. The interesting thing about the series is the fact that the argument for humanity's destruction and humanity's salvation are both put forward very convincingly, leaving you with the sense that maybe it would be better if humanity were to be destroyed (and possibly emerge again in primitive form in the course of natural evolution). This can be seen as a clash between the more deep-seated innate beliefs that come with the spiritualist Shinto background, a belief system which tends

towards living in harmony with nature, and the consumerist value system with which Japanese urban culture is inundated, a value system that Japanese society is not entirely comfortable with. The fact that the final decision is made by an ordinary young man, no different from any other young man in Japanese culture, seems designed to let the ordinary folk who watch the series identify with this character, and thus feel his perilous responsibility so as to make a warning message so much more emotive.

Another very famous *anime* movie (albeit famous in a select group) dealing with the destruction of nature at the hands of humanity is *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, (1983) which is set in a time after an apocalypse known as the 'Seven Days of Fire' (caused by war) has ravaged the planet and left very little habitable space for human existence. And of course humanity continues to wage war despite its precarious position. A princess, Nausicaa, tries to mediate between the various factions and at the same time understand the strange new vegetation covering the ravaged landscapes. As in *Blue Gender* this is a mechanism of nature designed to return the Earth to its original natural state, yet again allowing glimpses of Shintoism to be seen, in so far as suggesting that a certain type of life inhabits the planet Earth is in line with animistic spirituality. The interesting thing about this *anime* is that it was released in 1984, in an era in which the ecological crisis was in no way very topical -- even now, despite the disastrous effects of global warming on natural weather patterns, this crisis is generally sidelined in mainstream media. In terms of nihilism the fact that these *anime* productions exhibit a certain lack of faith in contemporary capitalist value structures (especially in so far as the destruction of nature is prompted by capitalism), and offer other possible value structures (although as often as not these alternatives would be just another passively nihilistic construct) can be seen, paradoxically, as an actively nihilistic reaction on the part of those responsible for producing the *anime*.

The powerlessness of the average person caught up in the consumer culture which overwhelms the globe in the contemporary capitalist era is also expressed in some *anime* elaborating on this theme. One of these shows, *Earth Girl Arjuna*,(2001) has a main character who becomes nature's champion, actually battling the malevolent spirits of

industrial or technological constructs (such as a nuclear power plant or factory), and thus attributing blame to clearly identifiable ecologically dangerous culprits. Once again identification with the main character is generated through the normality of her everyday existence, her fantastical double life notwithstanding. The fact that the audience will identify with this character allows a vicarious catharsis for members of the audience by allowing them to feel empowered by the destruction of the spirits generated by dangerous technology; this is not, however, necessarily a good thing, because generating this cathartic reaction in the audience will remove the need they feel to act against these forces, rendering them once again docile and malleable. The sheer amount of *anime* productions which thematise this conflict between technology and nature demonstrates very effectively that this is a very prominent tension in terms of nihilistic awareness in Japanese culture.

The volume of *anime* produced is staggering, and as such a massive amount is just consumerist trash. These can be seen as being kitsch, with all the nihilistic qualities attributed to kitsch, such as the anaesthetic effect it has on viewers. Many of these productions are pure escapism, where various formulas are used to create the same story with different characters and a slightly altered plot. It is very difficult to feel a sense of importance and individuality living in such an incredibly dense population as can be found in Japan and an escapist formula exists in many different forms to deal with this frustration in the form of an apparently meaningless existence. As I said earlier, the identification facilitated through mundane 'normal elements' of a character's existence is very common, allowing the audience (of course depending on which demographic group each particular animation project is aimed at) to place themselves in this character's shoes, and then, because identification has already taken place, the concomitant effect is that the rest of the character's life becomes shared qualities as well. This includes fantastical abilities and secret double lives, allowing the audience to share the secret and all the experience that goes with it. This then allows the audience to experience the abnormal and totally different life of the *anime* character vicariously, which satisfies many needs and urges created by the confining consumer-capitalist existence of contemporary urban workers, while removing any true motivation to change the life that

they lead. It is therefore not difficult to see that *anime* – especially the kitsch variety – is a double-edged sword: it offers a kind of vicarious fulfilment, but at the cost of this acting as an anaesthetic concerning the very real problems of capitalist society.

There are many examples of this type of *anime*, each tailored to suit a particular demographic. An example I am most familiar with, which is aimed at teenage to young adult men, uses the formula of the main character being a teenage or young adult male who goes to school or college in a very similar way to the life that any one of the target demographic group could lead, who is ordinary to the extreme. This young man is then enlisted or in some other way manages to join some exclusive society with certain extraordinary abilities which allow them to use psychic powers, or pilot huge battle robots, or any of a myriad of such possibilities. This society is somehow involved with protecting the country or the world from some sort of terrible enemy. The young man invariably turns out to be brilliant at whatever it is that they are doing. Another aspect of this type of *anime* is the fact that there will be an inordinately high number of incredibly attractive girls or women involved in this group, all of whom are highly skilled and seem very independent, and all of these girls will eventually fall madly in love with the main character. This will be as a result of the fact that, despite their being incredibly competent and powerful, the young man character will rescue them in some way during a vulnerable moment that they experience. Of course, the male character is not actually terribly interested in these women who end up throwing themselves at him, as he is more interested and involved with saving the world or country. He does eventually choose one of the women, although his choice will almost always be representative of what the patriarchal Japanese society believes a woman should be. This woman will love to cook for the man, be demure, soft-spoken, almost infantile, and think about the man constantly - the perfect Japanese woman. *Gatekeepers* (2000) is such an *anime* series, which makes any young man in the audience (who routinely identifies with the main character) feel terribly special, as opposed to the normal everyday life that they experience, in which women don't fall desperately in love with them for no conceivable reason.

There is a specific genre in this group of passively nihilistic *anime* series to which I would like to pay closer attention. This is the genre that deals with the concept of samurai in this passive structure. The samurai was the epitome of a Japanese man, and the pinnacle of Japanese society for many years, a society in which structure and social status are incredibly important. These old traditional ways were discarded in favour of a far more liberal individual-centered set of values. The new ways demanded self-determination, whereas the old ways have a ready-made structure into which one would slot, making it a far simpler way of life in which - for want of a better phrase - one did not have to make one's own destiny. Thus in an era of rampant nihilism and lack of readily available internalised value systems this tried and tested blueprint serves the same function as any fundamentalist religion with the same passive structure, such as Christianity. Anyone who has watched their share of martial arts or samurai movies knows what I mean when I speak about the samurai code; it has much to do with honour, justice, and honest one-on-one battle to sort out one's differences. In samurai culture one's skill speaks for one, as it is believed that one can only be strong in this fashion if you hold true to the values of the samurai, such as the belief that true strength comes from fighting not for oneself but rather to protect others, even to the point of self-sacrifice, and a lack of emotion that would make the Roman Stoics proud -- all that matters to a samurai is his own skill and justice. These values are not necessarily bad values. Some of them seem incredibly humane compared to the cutthroat amoral outlook of most people in the world today, mostly because capitalism functions on a very self-centred level, pitting person against person - as Kovel aptly points out, the soft-hearted are kicked off the corporate ladder early in the process of 'capitalist-selection' (Kovel 2002: 38); nevertheless, these value systems are archaic and outdated, unable to function in today's society. These *anime* series also serve to remind the essentially patriarchal society of Japan of a time when women were 'properly' behaved. This kind of *anime* narrative generally takes place during the transition between the Tokugawa era and the industrialized Meiji era -- in fact a huge number of the *anime* series I have watched focus on this time period. This is an expression of regret by contemporary culture, a mourning of the loss of these ancient traditional ways -- a knee-jerk reaction to the meaninglessness of modern life. The horror and tragedy of these years under the rule of the samurai are

forgotten, the era in retrospect seeming full of a goodness of life lacking today, despite the fact that life, human life, was worth very little in that time. This is similar to the rambling of grandfathers about how the world was a much better place when they were young. The people yearning for the 'simpler' way of life in samurai days are not truly engaging with the values inherent in it, rather they are yearning through the medium of *anime* in a sense similar to the evoking of memories through kitsch.

An interesting *anime* series which takes a far more actively nihilistic approach to contemporary society and ancient samurai society is *Rurouni Kenshin*. (1996). The series deals with the travels of a onetime samurai at the beginning of the new, less socially hierarchical, industrial era in Japan. The particular samurai, once one of the most feared and deadly warriors, travels with a reverse blade sword -- the special sword is symbolic of his oath never to kill again, as he has accepted the death of the old era and has chosen to use his skills in a non-lethal manner to help the transition between the two eras. The new era holds human life to be intrinsically valuable, trying to ensure that people like the one he used to be are no longer necessary. He is repeatedly goaded to relinquish his new-found respect for life, but he clings to his new principles, creating new meaning for himself in place of the old samurai virtues of death before dishonour. He finds meaning through relationships and the cultivation of those relationships, ignoring social status and the old hierarchy, demonstrating the possibility of exactly this kind of meaningful existence in the new era. This series tries to show that it is possible to find meaning in one's life without clinging to value structures created by other people. The main character shows his 'strength of spirit' in the form of his active nihilism in the face of the passively nihilistic 'idea' of the samurai, which is the idiom he is challenging -- Nietzsche supports this (Nietzsche 1968: 17-18):

It can be a sign of strength: the spirit may have grown so strong that previous goals ("convictions," articles of faith) have become incommensurate (for a faith generally expresses the constraint of conditions of existence, submission to the authority of circumstances under which one flourishes, grows, gains power).

*Ghost in the Shell*, (2002) a futuristic *anime* series, engages with the question of 'what makes a human human'. The series is a continuation of narratives set in a fictional reality created in one of the most popular and groundbreaking *anime* movies to date, also called *Ghost in the Shell*, directed by Mamoru Oshii (1996). In this reality cybernetic technology is very advanced, as is artificial intelligence. The protagonist is a woman who leads a team of agents who investigate cyber crime, which in this setting involves people hacking into other people's cybernetic brains, as one of the most popular products at this time is a cybernetic brain which, theoretically, would increase one's mental faculties exponentially. Of course, the threat of people electronically fiddling with personalities or extracting information from these electronic brains is very serious and unsettling. The protagonist is an entirely cybernetic person, having been transformed into one because of being too sick to survive longer than a short while in her original body. She was transferred (at least her personality was transferred) into the cybernetic body when she was a small girl, and she has existed her entire life without a single human body part. Part of the narrative deals with her constant debate and uncertainty about her own humanity, as she is not sure what constitutes humanity -- only her mind is human, and there are artificial intelligence programmes which seem just as human, if not more human, than she does. The acute Japanese dilemma in the form of a conflict between nature and technology is addressed here in an attempt to fuse spirituality and technology. The title *Ghost in the Shell* refers to the soul, and the question of what constitutes a soul. There is a group of artificial intelligence machines called *Tachikoma* which, in the course of the narrative, engage critically with their own self-awareness, and in so doing start questioning exactly what the nature of their existence is. All of the questioning concerning the nature of existence in this series is representative of a quest to find the meaning for one's own existence, a particularly actively nihilistic endeavour. Perhaps one should add that the idea of the separability of soul (mind, spirit, ghost) and body (machine) which undergirds this series is debatable. It reminds one of western philosophical dualism (or 'interactionism') such as that of Descartes (see Melchert 1991: 287-304), but the implications of such dualistic thinking are not what interests me here.

Each of these series I have mentioned, as well as many that I have not, could be analysed critically as a research project in itself. They are rich in possible insights into the complex tensions and idiosyncrasies of the very intricate societal structure of Japanese culture. I'm trying to focus on points that have the most bearing on my research into nihilism in selected media and the concomitant creation or adoption of societal value systems. The last theme I wish to deal with regarding *anime* is that of self-determination.

An *anime* series which I believe engages with this complex theme in a very enlightening manner is *Scrapped Princess*. (2005). In this series the plot centres on a young princess who is being hunted through the realms of a theocratic feudal world. At first this is seemingly just a story about a fugitive with a mysterious past and an even more mysterious future, on the run because of her birth as royalty. The reasons for which she is being chased are not clear, and as her adventures continue strange hints and stranger occurrences make the viewer realise that there is far more going on here than meets the eye. It turns out that the story is in fact taking place 5000 years into the future, and humanity is existing within a controlled environment situated on a small part of a continent created specifically to keep humanity from destroying itself through constant technological progress. It does not seem to have the wisdom to control this progress without destroying itself and nature. It is the same concept as when people in contemporary society create a nature reserve in order to prevent the extinction of certain natural species. This is also very similar to the concept of *The Matrix* in the movie of the same name, the fictional object of *The Matrix* being a computer programme which keeps humanity docile through the imposition of a fake reality. In *Scrapped Princess* the 'human conservation' is administered by a computer programme which has placed itself in a position of power by turning itself into a religion which is in turn controlled through various super high-tech robotic agents. This is the perfect example of a passively nihilistic system keeping an entire populace docile through specific values, even going so far as to suggest that religion in any fundamentalist fashion serves to stagnate society. The controlling programme keeps humanity in the feudal age, thwarting any technological or philosophical advance that would lead to insight into the stagnation of society and from there the encompassing imprisoned status. The question being dealt

with in this series is whether free will is worth the risk of self-destruction through self-determination is. The creators of this *anime* series answer this question by letting the character of the hunted princess, who is faced with the decision between safe continued existence of humanity and self-determined risky existence, choose self-determination -- the writers have opted for the actively nihilistic existence in which humanity will be responsible for its own future, even if it has none because of this choice, rather than continue 'safely' (but meaninglessly) without any true free will or internalised self-created values.

The broad picture painted by the *anime* that I have watched is one of a society filled with tensions concerning intrinsic human values, a culture that is torn between the more 'liberal' and personal value systems that constitute active nihilism in a world critically aware of the falsity of passively nihilistic ideological structures, and the safe, simple security of retreating into those preconstructed moral systems. *Anime* serves as a wonderful medium for expression of these tensions. Another reason one uses *anime* as a useful insight into Japanese culture and the tensions found in it, is the fact that Japanese culture is obsessed with facades -- appearances are incredibly important to the greater part of Japanese society. In this way media such as *anime* serve as a useful means to express the societal and cultural tensions, a way which circumvents the social dogma of facade and appearance in Japanese culture ([www.thejapanfaq.cjb.net](http://www.thejapanfaq.cjb.net)).

## Chapter 4:

Close critical analysis of a nihilistic artifact: *I 'heart' Huckabees*.

A movie which contains and engages with many of the aspects of nihilism which I have mentioned in my research study is Russell's *I (heart) Huckabees* (2005). The reason I put 'heart' in brackets is because the movie title does not use the word heart, but rather the symbol of a heart such as one would find on a bumper sticker. The title itself is already a comment on modern consumer culture; this formula is probably one of the most common on T-shirts, bumper stickers, and many more of the mementos bought by consumer culture tourists the world over. It is kitsch of the highest degree, as all it is meant to be is a reminder in a sentimentalist way of a certain time in a person's life when they visited somewhere as a tourist, and of course a way of showing that the person wearing the shirt is of a high enough social status (which equals financial status) to be able to afford to travel -- these T-shirts and other designs are as rule not at all pleasing to the eye, thus lacking any intrinsic aesthetic value. It also demonstrates the incredibly 'fake', or constructed, nature of the consumer value system. *Huckabees* is in fact a department store chain similar to Wal-Mart in the United States, and linking it to the word love (in this case the far more kitsch symbol of a heart) shows the utterly superficial nature of the phrase, as love is not something that anyone can attribute as some kind of response to a generic supermarket.

The movie, directed by David O. Russell, is the narrative of ecological activist, Albert Markovski (played by Jason Schwartzman), who is having an existential crisis, and who decides to approach a pair of existential detectives -- Bernard and Vivian (Dustin Hoffman and Lili Tomlin) -- to solve what he calls his 'coincidence'. During the course of the film he meets his other, Tommy Corn (Mark Wahlberg), who is a firefighter also going through his own personal existential crisis involving what he sees as society's responsibility for the widespread destruction caused by using petroleum. Tommy Corn Assists Albert in his efforts to solve his existential crisis while at the same time helping

him to retain control of the 'Coalition for Open Spaces', a group of ecological activists intent on saving as much of nature from urban sprawl as they can, which has been taken over by Albert's nemesis, Brad Stand (Jude Law). Brad is an executive working for the Huckabees Corporation, and is the consummate capitalist, and has merely taken control of this group in order to manipulate them so as to reap benefits for his company and himself. Tommy Corn also introduces Albert to another existentialist -- this time the nemesis of the first two existential detectives -- Catherine Vauban (Isabel Huppert) who has a far more radical and destructive response to the crisis facing the two men. The movie manages to satirise modern consumer culture quite effectively, using humour and subtle shifts between the sublime and the ridiculous to critically engage it. Most of the film's thrust is supplied by the presence of different forms of nihilism, to such a degree that some of the characters seem to be almost personifications of these concepts.

I intend to analyse this movie according to the nihilistic theoretical framework I have discussed and utilised up to this point. I think this movie is very relevant in its incorporation of nihilism (be it conscious or unconscious on the part of the director and writer), in the fact that value systems play an enormously important role in the composition of this film text. If we look at the different characters that seem to represent specific varieties of nihilism we see that they follow the pattern dictated by nihilistic realisation; first they must discover that the values they have held dear and which have anchored their lives in a moral and goal oriented way are actually empty of any true meaning. The film attacks the value systems associated with capitalism very effectively by focusing on the illusory quality of the consumerist value systems.

In the opening scene of the movie the audience is greeted by a string of profanities as Albert comes striding through the bushes arguing with himself about whether his life has any point to it or not, or whether anything he is doing is making any difference to the world at large. He threatens to 'quit' trying to do anything as he can see no real point any more, and his confusion is accentuated when he speaks about (coincidentally) seeing an African guy as some kind of sign, which is obviously a desperate clutch at some type of meaning beyond what he can see -- though this clutch does in fact lead him onto the path

that yields answers for him. The fact that Albert is seeking answers to questions which are for more substantial in that they deal with his very existence as a human and a sentient consciousness is the most important aspect of his search for the reason for his coincidence. Albert seems to me to be a representation of active nihilism - even having realised that what most people value is merely a mental hedge - he is still trying to find or create meaning that will hold more value for himself than what he sees around him in the capitalist world. In this opening scene Albert reads a poem in which he invokes respect towards the rock that he and his ecological activist group have managed to save - only one rock -, and the reason for this respect is attributed to the fact that the rock is able to 'exist' without any of the existential dilemmas that face humanity. The problem with this assessment is the simple fact that to just 'exist' is the worst possible human situation; without engaging with the world at large in a critical, social, or even in a spectator way one would indeed enter an existence similar to that of the large rock, unable to interact in any way with the outside world, something which is far more terrible than Albert's misplaced respect would have him believe. The fact that Albert and his activist group have only been able to save one rather arbitrary rock is symptomatic of the degree to which the majority of society in a global context takes ecological crisis seriously -- the ignorance and just blatant disregard towards the environmental crisis on the part of society at large is monumental considering the severity of the situation (outlined at length in Kovel 2002; see also *National Geographic* 2004 and Olivier 2005). The utterly ridiculous nature of the scale of the rock compared to the entire environment they could not save emphasises the actually ludicrous (if not tragicomic) nature of human disregard for nature's plight, as well as the fact that the media is present to record the 'generosity' of large corporations when it comes to their ecological obligations, while disregarding the rest of the habitat that is soon to be flattened so as to make way for more capitalist-induced urban sprawl.

Albert, to my mind, represents active nihilism in the narrative of the movie. He is searching for meaning as a response to the total 'lack of faith' (or lack of meaning) – not necessarily in a religious sense - and as a result distancing himself from modern consumerist values. It is for this reason that he contacts the two existential the detectives,

so that they may solve (the significance of) his 'coincidence'. The problem that they actually set out to address is far less specific than his supposed coincidence, which is more a symptom of his frantic search for value. Vivian (Lily Tomlin), the female existential detective, introduces Albert to her male counterpart Bernard (Dustin Hoffman) after she accepts his case. At this point Bernard reveals that he and his partner believe in universal unity, similar to Buddhist mentality; they have created their own set of values, and use those values in an attempt to help those that come to them for assistance to find a value system that works for them. If the detectives merely impose their own version of structured value on their clients, their approach would be no different than that of the representatives of any other dogmatic value system being imposed by organised institutions such the Church or other organised religion. I believe the detectives serve the function of introducing Albert to nihilistic thought, and help him fully engage with the questions that have been raised by nihilistic 'realisation'. They do not function alone, rather these two with their ideology of unity form a nihilistic discourse in conjunction with the 'guidance' delivered to the individual such as Albert by their supposed nemesis Catherine Vauban (Isabel Huppert), albeit an unintentional conjunctive discourse of a different variety of nihilism. Together these two 'agents of nihilism' (the detectives are considered one of the agents) take the nihilistic client through an enlightening journey of self-discovery (a kind of *Bildung*) in which they are prompted to ask searching questions and delve into certain past experiences in order to be able to provide their own answer to their own dilemma. The two 'agents of nihilism' do not form a cohesive nihilistic discourse on their own; the subject in the form of an individual searching for their own reaction to nihilistic realisation is required in this mix.

Catherine Vauban approaches her role in guidance from a completely different angle to that taken by the partner detectives -- she promotes a far more radical form of nihilism and indeed a radically nihilistic reaction to nihilistic 'realisation'. She takes the opposite stance to the theory of unity espoused by the detectives, rather suggesting that there is no link between anything, and that nothing matters, so one can do as one pleases without thought of consequence or care. It is the tensions between the two different approaches which leads an individual such as Albert to discover what it is that he truly values, and to

answer questions about his own place and identity in the confusing number driven world of modern global consumer culture.

On his first visit to the existential detectives Albert is placed in a position of sensory deprivation in order to allow his unconscious to invade his conscious mind so that he can begin to identify and deal with all the various influences on his state of mind and value system. It is in this state that we are first introduced to Brad Stand (Jude Law), Albert's nemesis or opposite, to whom he is magnetically drawn and from whom he is just as magnetically repulsed. Brad Stand seems to me to be the flipside of the coin that is Albert, in almost every way, including the fact that he seems to my mind to be the representation of passive nihilism in the film narrative, a representation of the illusory nature of capitalist gratification. Where Albert has discovered a need to search for value in his life, Brad has bought into the passively nihilistic structure of consumer culture, in which the abstract value of currency and the appearance of wealth are the only values that matter - Brad himself is like an empty vessel, having no real substance of his own beyond his identity in capital terms. It is here that we see Albert being torn between taking the easy route in accepting the value structure defined by modern capitalist consumer culture or defining his own value structure in the face of the overwhelmingly dominant capitalist perspective. In the narrative of the movie Brad Stand appears to be supremely confident and overwhelmingly powerful to the mentally and morally beleaguered Albert, threateningly so when it comes to the fact that Brad is effectively stealing control of Albert's group of activists who fight for the existence of 'open spaces' in the mass of urban sprawl that is modern urban living. In a curious parallel the representative of capital (Brad) is thieving from and destroying the (rather ineffectual) representative of nature (Albert), which is exactly the relationship between capital and nature on a global scale.

Brad is in fact also introduced to the existential detectives through association with Albert, and decides to garner their services - in the film narrative it seems that Brad does this more to get to Albert than because he is really trying to find clues so as to be able to solve some type of existential dilemma. When Brad is, however, exposed to the possible

questions concerning his own identity and the validity of his value systems, his facade of cool control and calm confidence cracks under the weight of critical self-examination. His supposedly perfect life (even to himself seemingly perfect) is exposed as being essentially empty of anything but capital - there is no 'human drama' which Catherine Vauban speaks of. Brad's reliance on facade becomes evident, and the interesting thing about this is the way in which capitalism and consumer values are able to make one feel as if there is nothing amiss until one is forced to really examine what comprises the every-day life. Another strength of the consumerist facade is the way in which it comes across to others, as in the old adage 'the grass is always greener on the other side', people without money observe those with money in a wistful manner hoping to someday also be able to live the life filled with the happiness that money seems to bring - 'seems', because it is more a matter of wishful thinking germinated by consumerist facade than truth, the truth being that in capitalist society the mechanism of capital exists in such a way that one has to think about money in almost every situation, because the less money you have the more you want money, and the more money you have the more careful you have to be not to lose it, hence it is not a concern that ever gets sidelined. Brad's facade of perfection and contentment is what makes him so magnetic to Albert, who is searching for a set of values which will allow him to reach a state of contentment, but who has realised intrinsically that capitalist values hold little real substance.

Another instance of Albert's struggle between finding or creating values of his own and accepting capitalist value is revealed when the detectives discover that Albert goes to the shop that sells photographic stills of celebrities, not to look at the old Jessica Lange pictures as he says, but rather to insert head shots of himself in an effort to make himself feel important; if people see his picture amongst those of other celebrities, that would immediately associate him with celebrity status - one of the few ways in which individuals can stand out in the modern mediated society. This seems to be a minor exploration of the illusory quality of celebrity itself, as it indicates that celebrity is a function of societal perspective - one is only a celebrity if the majority of society believes you are one.

Brad has a great job, a wonderful house, a beautiful girlfriend, an awesome car, and even jet skis; but all of this is part of the facade created by Brad, the portrait of himself that he put on show for the world to see. When the detectives start to investigate he even tries to produce fake rubbish for them; he leaves trash in the trash containers that he believes someone at ease with the world and their existence in it would have, yet again trying to show people (in this case the detectives) what he thinks they want to see, which is part of his desperate attempt to garner the approval he needs to validate his empty existence. The detectives expose the fact that his relationship with his wife has no true depth, they are together simply because of who they are, and the package the two of them represent as a couple; he is the rising star corporate executive, and she is the face of the corporation he works in (the media 'face'), and yet their interaction is very limited - they go on holiday with their jet skis and drink expensive cocktails, but their sex life smacks of duty more than any kind of sexual intimacy as one would expect in a meaningful relationship.

This ties in with capitalist nihilism, as Brad is fully under the influence of the capitalist perspective, judging his own success and the success of others according to capital measurements. We see this in the way he judges his brother, who is an unattractive overweight and unsuccessful man who likes geckoes. Yet at the same time the audience gets a sense that Brad is in fact jealous of his brother in that he seems perfectly content to live his life in a way which seems completely unsuccessful to the capitalist minded Brad while still somehow finding fulfillment which Brad cannot find. Brad keeps a hidden stash of the fake plastic replicas of the little lizards which his brother likes so much, seemingly secretly proud of his brothers strange idiosyncrasy. During a corporate meeting Brad tells a story concerning himself and Shania Twain, in which he clearly manages to get the famous singer to eat chicken salad sandwiches to which she maintains she is allergic, by supposedly ordering tuna sandwiches. The singer did not throw up from eating the disguised chicken salad sandwiches, thus leaving Brad a victorious manipulator in this scenario. The story, in context with the film narrative, is the cornerstone of Brad's corporate identity; when he gets a promotion his boss invites him to a meeting of the board, and it turns out that he was only invited so that he could tell his funny little anecdote. The story is designed to make him seem very important in

capitalist eyes; this occurs through him linking himself with one of the pinnacles of American capitalist culture, a celebrity, and then in the same story putting him a peg above the celebrity by the fact that he managed to pull one over on her. The detectives point out to him the fact that he tells no other stories, but he does tell this story over and over again, for the lack of anything else to converse about when not doing business, in other words his life is empty except for this one little anecdote he regurgitates all the time.

When the detectives ask Brad whether he can be himself without telling the story, Brad asks: 'How am I not myself?' This simple question illustrates the dilemma facing all of the nihilism-affected or -infected characters searching for meaning in the film narrative - how does one define one's own identity (especially in negative terms)? I do not believe that any person has one specific identity to which the person holds true at all times - identity is dependent on perspective; every person will have a different, even if only slightly, identity in the eyes of every other person, even to themselves. There are many influences which constitute our identities, such as our values, and other abstracts such as emotions and sense of humour, as well as the physical realities such as our appearance, race, and gender; included in this is a slight variation in the way one behaves when in the company of different individuals, depending on what the 'identity' of each one does as an influence. There is however a what I call a 'core identity' to every individual, which tends to dictate to a reasonable degree the way in which a person's identity as a whole would change in reaction to influences at any given time. The psychoanalytic theorist, Lacan, explains all of this well with his distinction between the two 'subject-positions' that every person has - the 'I'-position and the 'me' or self-position (Lee 1990: 40-41): the 'I' position stands for the perspective from which one perceives the person or subject as 'self', supposedly with a fixed identity. But one's ability to look at anyone, even oneself, from that perspective, shows that one's 'identity' is always undermined by a different position occupied by another 'aspect' of one's subjectivity - what seems to me the more fundamental position. This 'I'-perspective that Lacan talks about is what I call the 'core identity'. When Brad asks 'How am I not myself?', it seems to me that he is in fact being shown as not having any truly valid core identity from which he perceives the

world and other people, he only reacts to outside influences through a desperate need for approval, taking on the character traits he thinks others wish to see. This links with nihilism, as without having any (from the perspective of the 'I' in Lacan's terms) self-chosen, 'intrinsic' value structure unique to himself (one that could, as a result of new choices, change, of course), he has followed the passively nihilistic route of assimilating the value systems associated with capitalism, a chameleonic reaction incredibly common in today's global society, as a result of nihilism having become pervasive under capitalism. It seems to me that Brad is a paradigmatic case of nihilistic behaviour in the context of capitalism, in so far as he is virtually completely 'reactive' – which is exactly the way that he is 'not himself', and also the way in which 'reactive' consumers 'are not themselves'. People want to fit in, because without any intrinsic way of validating their own existence, they need others to validate that existence, so that they do not feel so lost and isolated -- they assimilate the supposed 'purpose' of being a part of the community of consumers.

Even though Brad did not actually mean for the detectives to have any real impact on his life, the thorough degree to which they dismantle the value structures that govern his existence leads to a sort of mental breakdown, which culminates in the calm, cool and collected Brad breaking down into tears when he comes home to find that his capitalist castle (his house) is on fire. This breakdown is captured in the form of a photograph by Catherine Vauban, as proof to both Brad and Albert (who in fact set the fire and is witness to the crying capitalist) that supposed consumerist perfection is merely an anaesthetic to true human drama. Brad has seen through his own plastic life in which all potential human, 'existential' value has been reduced to mere exchange value, and his own critical appraisal of that life leaves him in tears -- the same man who managed to convince Albert's ecological activist group to switch loyalty from Albert to Brad by simply compromising the integrity of the group through dangling consumerist value before their eyes. He gives them T-shirts to commemorate the Huckabees involvement with the ecological movement to save open spaces in order to promote the corporate image, as well as staging a benefit with singer Shania Twain, to which they are of course invited (a free concert).

Thus all of this has to do with facade once more, as, despite the fact that the corporation is not actually going to do very much for the open spaces cause, it being linked to ecological awareness will make it seem as if it is a company with public interest at heart and with clout enough to pull in a high-calibre celebrity. One sees the theme of the facade in this vein being explored more in a comical instance, when Brad's wife says 'Fuckabees' instead of 'Huckabees' to Brad's boss. This is ironic in that she (her face) represents the corporation as a brand, and when the personification of this brand profanes this very same image which she is meant to be projecting, it is very telling about the truth behind the illusions. The boss reacts in consternation, similar to the way in which a religious person reacts if you 'take the Lord's name in vain', and illustrating the fact that what one associates with a brand is far more important than the 'reality' of the corporation associated with it. In passing it is also striking that the place of the deity in monotheism has evidently today been taken by 'the brand'. This points back to branding, which I spoke of in the chapter on the relationship between capitalism and nihilism, and serves to illustrate the extent to which the truth about corporations' objectives as far as consumers are concerned does not necessarily have any connection with branding. In a sense, the brand is always 'empty'; it is 'nothing' ('nihil') except a profit-motivated image associated with consumerist actions promising 'fulfillment' on the part of consumers.

Brad's wife, Dawn Campbell (Naomi Watts), has much to do with the link between the illusory 'brand' and consumer values. She is the 'face' of Huckabees, the figurehead of the image which Huckabees uses to brand their corporation, and she starts off as a completely two-dimensional character, being almost abstract herself. She meets the existential detectives coincidentally when they come to investigate Brad's life at home, and at first she is very resistant to the idea, but then becomes involved in the process of value-dismantling that is taking place in the lives of Albert and Brad. This leads to her addressing her own existential dilemma, which in this case is similar to Brad's in the fact that she has fully assimilated and conformed to the identity given to her by her place in consumer culture, that identity being the corporate face of Huckabees. Her existence is

based around the fact that she is the brand of Huckabees, and in such a capacity she is a media icon, though only in visual and audible aspects. She can only perform this function as long as she remains 'beautiful' and projects the image of a successful (post-)modern consumer, showing up the fact that the 'value' she as a person holds for the corporation is completely superficial and has absolutely nothing to do, necessarily, with her personal value systems. When she stops adhering to the values that she is meant to project, she is no longer suitable even to enter the corporate building through the front door, as this would tarnish the image they are trying to nurture. This is itself interesting in the fact that the physical corporation nurtures the abstract image of the brand, while exploiting the tangible reality of nature, at the same time engaging once more with the abstract by maintaining the illusion that it is a benefactor of nature. This is an example of a human being assuming the characteristics and being treated as a commodity by an agent of capital, in this way being stripped of 'human' value ('annihilated' as a human). In capital this process of furthering its own kind of nihilism happens progressively at many levels, right down to that of ordinary consumer-behaviour.

Brad and his wife are part of each other's facades, each completing the other's illusory existence. Brad states that he no longer knows who she is when she stops bothering about her own appearance and wanders around dressed like an Amish woman; he no longer wants to associate with her, as she is no longer complementing his corporate image. Dawn finds out that she is completely replaceable by the corporation, exhibiting the fact that being a unique individual is completely unimportant in the idiom of consumer culture -- in fact the corporation continues to use her voice, but replaces her image with that of another 'pretty' girl. At the end of the movie the new 'Miss Huckabees' is signing autographs, but she does not sign her own picture, she signs pictures of the 'old' Miss Huckabees, emphasising the generic nature of the iconic role she plays. Dawn asks Brad whether he loves her, and he answers that he thinks so, but when she asks him whether he loves her while she is wearing the Amish bonnet, he says no -- once again this shows the influence of the superficial in the capitalist value system, as Dawn has two different identities from Brad's perspective, one of which he cannot deal with. Dawn finds someone who is capable of loving her without the capitalist illusion

she projected for Huckabees, namely Tommy Corn -- Albert's 'other'. After Tommy has fled from what he sees as betrayal by Albert and Catherine, he saves Dawn from the house that is on fire, and an immediate connection is born.

All the characters that the film narrative engages with on an extensive level -- excluding the three that comprise what I term the agents of nihilism (the two existential detectives and Catherine Vauban) -- challenge the value systems imposed on them by contemporary consumer culture. The only remaining character in this group that I have not yet dealt with is Tommy Corn; Tommy Corn takes the most aggressive and most radically nihilistic stance towards the values that he is trying to challenge. He is a firefighter, which in the eyes of the American public, after 9/11, would make him an incredibly trustworthy and heroic figure, which allows the message of the film-narrative to be unconsciously perceived as being more plausible by association -- as I'm sure the filmmakers were aware. The first time we encounter Tommy in the film narrative is when Bernard (one of the existential detectives) goes to his house to try and defuse the situation in which Tommy's wife is busy leaving him, and Tommy himself is trying to explain to her in a rather disconcerting manner that he needs her to stick around and take part in his search for identity and value. Bernard tries to reason with Tommy, who argues with Bernard, quoting from the book by Catherine Vauban, which contains some very different ideas concerning value and existence than those espoused by Bernard and his wife.

Catherine Vauban pushes a far more radically nihilistic point of view, that being the perspective that nothing matters and nothing is connected, and one can do exactly as one pleases without any thought of consequence. This is the reaction to nihilistic 'realisation' if one does not manage to get past the loss of all internalised value structures, and is left with no concept of any value -- this leads to a destructive attitude, towards the self and all that is external to the self. Tommy has not completely accepted this line of thinking as of yet, but he is attempting to engage with it to test its validity in his search. He has singled out capitalism, and most specifically within capitalism the petroleum industry, as being one of the main culprits in fostering the value-less nature of modern capitalist culture. He

maintains that anyone who uses petrol is passively taking part in murder, by poisoning other people on the planet as well as empowering the oil industry and in so doing the middle-eastern dictatorships, and participating in the destruction of the natural environment. His wife says she just wants to carry on with her life, and he responds by asking her if she is not interested in questioning the existence which she is leading, to which she responds that she does not -- this is a microcosm of consumer culture, where people have passively accepted the system as it is, unwilling to leave the safety of unquestioning belief and behaviour. This is a mindset which is challenged by active nihilism, as the active nihilist must be critically away of himself or herself as well as the society in which the person dwells. The fact that people are socialised into being unquestioning of the *status quo* is exhibited by the way in which Tommy's daughter reacts when he tells her that her mother's shoes are made in a factory in Indonesia by a young girl just like her who will go blind in the dark factory earning 'one dollar 60' a month for the profit of corporations; she screams that he should stop this from happening, that he must stop the girls from going blind. This reaction is presumably the natural reaction to this kind of injustice and cruelty, but the adult population of modern global consumerist culture ignores the situation, having become numb to the misery that goes hand-in-hand with capitalism – from an active nihilistic perspective (one which does not simply confirm the *status quo*, but represents the beginning of an attempt to change an intolerable situation), people should react the way the child reacts.

Albert meets Tommy at the offices of the existential detectives Bernard and Vivian, when they introduce them to each other so that they may become their respective 'others'; Bernard and Vivian feel that at a specific point in their clients' search for value and the accompanying dismantling and analysis of themselves, their lives, and the society in which they exist, interacting with another person going through the same existential crisis will be beneficial to both parties. Tommy and Albert get along well, as the values that they want to believe in are very similar in that these are ecologically based, and both of them have huge problems with capitalism. What Bernard and Vivian did not count on was the fact that Tommy would lead Albert in a rebellion against their investigation, instigated by the fact that Brad is now also a client of the two existential detectives.

Albert and Tommy go to investigate the former's 'coincidence' (involving the encounter with an African man) by themselves, having lost faith in the theory of unity in which Bernard and Vivian believe.

Investigating the 'coincidence' leads them to finding the African man whom Albert keeps seeing by coincidence, whom they find living as a member of a typically American suburban family. He is in fact a Sudanese refugee who has been taken in by the family. Albert and Tommy are invited for lunch with the family as friends of the African man, during which the family's passively nihilistic nature is exposed. It is not by accident that this family is chosen to represent the generic consumer culture family found all over the United States. Tommy and Albert have an argument with the mother and father of the family about whether it would still be possible to have progress while trying to maintain the ecological stability of the planet, among other things. The mother and father both take a superior attitude towards Albert and Tommy's philosophical and existential queries concerning their lives and life-values, telling their kids that they do not have to ask those kinds of questions -- they are therefore reinforcing the acceptance of the *status quo*. The hypocrisy inherent in western, developed consumer culture is exposed in this encounter, as well as the ignorance concerning the true implications of so-called progress regarding the world at large, all hidden behind a veneer of responsibility in the form of isolated actions such as taking a Sudanese refugee into their home. Tommy points out that the entire Sudanese problem is very closely linked to the way in which the developed world manipulates developing countries in order to have access to resources for capital expansion. The scene should serve as a mirror to much of developed society, showing how ridiculous (and more disturbingly, how 'passively destructive') the complacent attitude of contemporary society is.

We see the same type of values in Albert's family, where Catherine Vauban forces him to face something which happened very long ago in his past, in which instance his cat, which he loved very much, died. When he went to tell his mother, she sidelined the cat and his grief over it so that she could keep entertaining her friend, once again demonstrating the superseding of real issues by the facade. Albert was in fact made to

feel guilty about his grief at the loss of his cat, as if having genuine feeling about such a thing is trivial. His parents are passive capitalist nihilists, as demonstrated by the new sound system; even as Albert leaves his parents are no longer concerned with his dilemma, having turned back to the radio and the problems they are having with setting it up properly, exhibiting their serious imbalance in values. Catherine Vauban says that he has been 'trained to betray himself' by instances like that of the cat dying; he has been trained to doubt his own emotions and instincts because of the fact that he received no support or confirmation of the value of emotions (or, for that matter, pets) growing up, which is a microcosm of the same situation repeated all over consumer society.

Catherine Vauban demonstrates to Tommy and Albert the release brought about by radical nihilism through completely instinctual and thoughtless self-satisfaction. She does this by showing them the total oblivion of thought encountered by hitting themselves in the face with a large inflated ball, simply through being too stunned to think for a few seconds, and thus not caring for a short while about anything else. This is similar to any hedonistic action without thinking about the consequences, rather doing it simply for the act itself, which is, from this perspective, completely radically nihilistic. In other words, under these, perhaps short-lived, conditions of experiencing something that effectively obliterates everything else, 'nothing (else) matters'. She does say that this is not in fact the answer, and that one cannot live life this way, as the 'human drama' in the form of things that matter to an individual will still intrude. However, it seems to me that the film may be hinting that such 'hedonistic' actions 'released' by radical nihilism may form the starting point for experiencing the intrinsic value of certain things again, freeing people from the illusion that only the exchange value of capitalism counts. (A film like David Fincher's *Fight Club*, referred to earlier, takes this view to the extreme of suggesting that, in a consumer culture people -- men -- may even turn to the experience of extreme pain being inflicted on them in barefisted fights, as a reminder that there are certain things that escape consumer values.)

The culmination of the journey of experience for Albert, Tommy, and Dawn is the fire that Albert starts at Brad's house. Dawn and Tommy come together in support of each

other's new values, breaking the isolation they felt before that in the consumer society. For Albert the fire is like a catharsis, liberating him from and at the same time bonding him to Brad, showing Albert the truth of human existence in today's society: humans are all flawed, which is completely normal; it is the image of societal 'perfection' in materialist terms, promoted by consumer culture, that is false, just an illusion. The artificial lack created by consumer culture, which so infects postmodern society in the capitalist world in order to make people believe they need whatever product is being sold, is completely fabricated. He and Brad are both searching for some way to live their lives so that it has some kind of fulfilment for them. Bernard says to the crying Brad, 'Nothing is okay, so it is okay', which explains the idea of societal perfection being an illusion very succinctly -- nothing in the world is perfect, so it is all right not to be perfect in this imperfect world. This is a radically nihilistic insight which paves the way for active nihilism, and therefore for the possibility of finding and choosing something valuable for yourself, something not promoted as the latest consumerist fad.

When Brad meets Shania again at the benefit, the reality of her is completely different to the image which has been generated throughout the movie, of her being a two-dimensional celebrity. She turns out to be a three-dimensional person who actually does care about the environment. Brad says in a relatively shocked manner to Albert that she actually does know his name (after she has yelled at him for telling that ridiculous story). Albert derides him for that, to which Brad responds that he was merely making a joke, but then admits that he has completely bought into consumer culture. Albert makes the same admission, saying that that was the reason he 'bought into' Brad. I see this as demonstrating the fact that it is impossible to live without adopting a certain amount of capitalist behaviour or practice in the mediated, consumer-driven world of today (even someone as opposed to capitalism as Joel Kovel admits this – see Kovel 2002: 11), but you can be critically aware of this behaviour and try to maintain true values of your own. At this point Brad has completed his process of dismantling, and needs to complete his reconstruction, for which Albert gives him Catherine Vauban's card -- the second stage in the nihilistic journey.

I 'heart' Huckabees explores many different forms of nihilism, as well as many of the reasons for this of nihilism in today's society. It shows us the truly illusory quality of consumer culture, and the true nature of the insecurities that plague us, as well as the fact that these insecurities are not necessarily problems, but rather (liberating) questions waiting to be asked. It has many other aspects that it covers in a critical manner, but I have concentrated on those that are most applicable to my research project.

## **Conclusion:**

The media, in a word encapsulating all forms of the diverse and popular audiovisual media, include without a doubt the most dominant forms of popular art in the world today. As such, the media serve as possibly the most comprehensive collection of societal 'expressions' available for analysis in the postmodern era. In my research I have been attempting to analyse specific forms of media - namely film and *anime* - in context with the relevant cultural 'surroundings' which spawned the particular medium I focus on in each section.

To be able to analyse and engage with the media artifacts properly, I needed a strong theoretical framework through which this would be possible. To this end I familiarised myself with the work of Nietzsche as one of the pioneering thinkers in the concept of nihilism, as well as briefly exploring the work of other thinkers who have engaged with and extrapolated from Nietzsche's original conceptualisation of the pervasive phenomenon that is nihilism. Differentiating between the various forms of nihilism and understanding these differences is vital in being able to understand the way in which different people react when faced with the first blossoming of a nihilistic perspective. For this reason my research focuses on the characteristics of active, passive, and radical nihilism. My own personal suggestion of a nihilism specific to this era of rampant capitalism, 'capitalist nihilism', is important because there is no part of postmodern existence that is not affected in some way by the pervasive influences of capitalism, and I believe that everything we as human beings experience is in some way influenced by this relationship.

Nihilism has to do with value systems, and capitalism functions by converting everything into a type of commodity, quantifying and attaching 'exchange-value' to anything that can be judged according to its 'usefulness' (that is, its profitability) in capitalist terms, and judging everything that does not fit into this classification as worthless. Never before has 'value' been so specifically defined as in the quantifying nature of judging existence

in the capitalist economic structure of the contemporary era. The relationship between capitalism and nihilism is therefore very important when trying to understand the influences of nihilism on contemporary culture, specifically through the media, in the way that they express these influences in a form that can be analysed in context with this fundamentally important relationship. The media are in fact the most influential of capitalism's agents - almost every member of society (most importantly those millions who qualify as 'consumers') expose themselves to the influences of the modern media on a daily and routine basis, making the media invaluable to capitalism, in that the creation of artificial need (fake lack) is the name of the game, and the media is the tool of choice. Fortunately, as is the case with art, including popular art, the media are also vessels for critical thought concerning the culture that generates it.

Approaching the concept of nihilism in a culture which has had a very different evolution to mainstream 'western' culture, namely Japanese culture, is important in my research in that it shows that in the current era nihilism is present, and in fact prevalent, in cultures which are quite different - nihilism is not unique to those cultures which derived directly from European influences. Japanese culture did not have the same trigger mechanism in the rise of nihilism as European nihilism, that being the dominating influence of Christianity falling away, but it did undergo a cultural value-revolution. The medium of *anime* once again serves as a particular form of popular art which can be analysed to expose tensions and cultural idiosyncrasies that are integrated in this medium as a result of the influence of the culture in which is created and thus reflects. At all times it must be understood that, although I do not have the space to go into this relationship between art and society in detail (it would take a separate treatise), it is not a simple one of 'direct' reflection or representation, but a very complex one where societal influences are modified in fictional terms to be able to 'leave their mark', as it were, on (popular) works of art like films.

To demonstrate the relationship between this 'expressionism' and the (potentially) critical nature of the film medium in contemporary culture I analysed a film (*I 'heart' Huckabees*) which critically approaches and examines nihilism in contemporary society.

This case study serves as illustration that the popular art form, the medium of film, contains within its own texts the 'reflection' and in fact critique of postmodern culture. The film I chose deals very specifically with the nature of nihilism in the contemporary capitalist world, examining the relationships between the influences of the capitalist world, the media, and personal value systems.

Nihilism is rife in the world of today, which has reacted to the void left by the collapse of traditional value systems by creating the most incredible number of ways in which to ignore completely the implications of reaching a nihilistic state of mind. Arbitrary value systems that have no business existing in a culture that would hope to be 'functional' (personally and socially fulfilling) abound, hand-in-hand with, and in fact part of the 'anaesthetic' (capitalist) paradigm which serves to protect and insulate the cowardly human mind from the terror so often experienced when faced with the 'truth' of human existence: that there is no ultimate, finally uplifting plan for each human life (Nietzsche 1968: 14-20). The media in a collective sense are the 'drug of choice' for many consumers in the process of self-narcoticization.

This is part of the dilemma of the media: never before in the long history of humanity has any single (in a collective sense) entity wielded so much power through influence over such a vast percentage of all the cultures worldwide. The media comprise a power which may prove to become the ultimate force for the anaestheticisation of human existence, ensuring the stagnation of human culture – or, on the other hand, a power that may (has the potential to) prove to be the wakeup call through the critical engagement with and reflection of the 'superficial' nature of the greater part of global culture, as being predominantly in the service of capitalist values. I end with a philosophical reflection which shows (not without interpretative difficulties) that we humans are the only answer to the nihilistic dilemma (Nietzsche 1968: 550):

*A solution for all its riddles? A light for you, too, you best-concealed, strongest, most intrepid, most midnightly men? - This world is the will to power - and*

nothing besides! And you yourselves are also this will to power - and nothing besides!

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